小説 藤崎都
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原作&まんが 中村春菊
Shungiku Nakamura
横澤隆史の場合2
世界一初恋
セカイイチハツコイ
角川ルビー文庫

**Title:** *Sekai-ichi Hatsukoi ~ The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi 2*

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# Short story omake (Dec 2011 and Jan 2012 special)

Hiyo had been making quite a fuss since some time before in front of the television, watching the video streaming across the screen which showed the earlier Field Day festivities as recorded with a hand-held video camera that Kirishima had borrowed.

“Ah, look look!! There you are, Oniichan!”

“Yeah yeah, I see…” Yokozawa grimaced, glancing off to the side to catch sight of himself on screen, standing at the start line. Looking at himself like this, it was easy to see he was a good decade younger than most of the other fathers who’d been standing beside him—a fact made all the more embarrassing by how uncharacteristically fired up he’d been at the time.

“Oniichan~! Do your best~!!”

“What do you mean *do your best*? You know how it turns out!”

“Oh come on, It doesn’t hurt to cheer you on! Ah—are you *blushing*, Oniichan??”

“*No*.” Of course he wasn’t; it was only that he couldn’t stand this. The reason Yokozawa had participated in the parent-guardian obstacle race in the first place had been because Kirishima had been saddled with some work he couldn’t get out of at the last minute. While Hiyori hadn’t protested one bit even after her father had informed her he couldn’t take part in her school’s Field Day activities, she’d been overjoyed to learn that Yokozawa would go in his stead.

Once he’d offered to participate, though, Yokozawa had vowed that he wouldn’t embarrass himself, and so, well out of sight of Kirishima or Hiyori, Yokozawa had been running laps every morning and doing a bit of muscle training to prep for this day.

In the end, Kirishima had finished lunching with his author in time to make the afternoon program, but he could hardly run dressed as he was in a suit and dress shoes, so Yokozawa still had to take part.

At the sound of the pistol, Yokozawa had taken off at a dash, clearing the obstacles one by one, easily becoming the first to reach a small table where several cards lay face down. Without hesitating, he picked up the card nearest his feet—and reflexively glanced in a certain direction. Immediately afterward, though, he

recovered his senses and shifted in place to face the opposite direction, taking off running again.

“Kyaa!! Oniichan, you’re so cool!”

Yokozawa was now off and running towards where Hiyori was sitting with the other 5th graders. Leaning down, he lifted up Hiyori from where she sat on the front row and took off again towards where the teachers acting as judges were stationed, running with all his might. After having them stamp his card as proof that he’d cleared the task, he then headed for the goal, leaving the other participants in the dust as he crossed the finish line. Hiyori, whose eyes had gone wide with surprise when Yokozawa had scooped her up, was all grins, thrilled that Yokozawa had managed to nab first place.

“You were *amazing* Oniichan! But you really gave me a start when you picked me up!”

“I didn’t have much choice in the matter—I had to just grab you and go!”

“Hehe, yup! All my friends were totally jealous, too! They said I was like a princess!”

Just as Yokozawa allowed himself a moment of relief at his image disappearing from the screen, though, Kirishima cut in with the one question he *absolutely* didn’t want to entertain right now: “That reminds me—what was written on that card anyways?”

“…That’s a secret.”

“*What*? What’s it matter—tell me! Hey—Hiyo, what did it say?”

“Can’t tell you, Papa! It’s mine and Oniichan’s little secret~! And—I’ve got plans with Yuki-chan tomorrow, so I’m off to bed! G’night!”

“What the hell—*tell me*! Why’re you two messing around like this?”

“You heard Hiyo—it’s a secret. I can’t tell you.” Yokozawa had pasted on a calm, superior expression, but inside he was breaking out in cold sweat, all nerves.

The card had had *Your Most Important Person* written on it.

Yokozawa assumed it had been phrased so with the intent that the parent who picked it up would run and grab their child, but the moment Yokozawa had read those words, without thinking, he'd sought out Kirishima in the crowd.

"When you picked up that card, though—didn't you glance up at me for a second?"

"N—*no*. I was looking for Hiyo."

"Well you weren't going to find her looking in the *parents'* seats."

"I know that! I just made a mistake was all." There was no way in hell he was going to let Kirishima know that the first person Yokozawa had thought of when he read *most important person* was him. At Yokozawa's hesitation, Kirishima didn't let up on his investigation one bit, though.

"Is it perhaps that you don't *want* me to know what was written on that card?"

"It's not *that*—I'm telling you, it was nothing! Don't get bent out of shape about it—ah, Hiyo, isn't it almost time for you to be in bed? Don't think just because it's the weekend you can stay up past your bedtime. Go brush your teeth."

"Already done! Sora-chan~ let's go to bed!"

At hearing his name called, Sorata lifted his head up from where he'd been curled up on the sofa, then jumped down from the sofa and followed Hiyori into her room. The two had become quite close, behaving as if they'd been friends for the longest time.

Seeing Yokozawa watching the pair head off together with a soft smile on his face, Kirishima jumped in with a low voice, "You tried to give me the slip just now, didn't you? But I must say I find this hesitation of yours rather suspicious…"

Yokozawa flinched as Kirishima hit the nail on the head. "Why the hell are you so obsessed with that stupid card anyways? It's a gag for an elementary school *field day*—"

"Because now my sensors are going off."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? I don't get you at all."

Yokozawa shifted away from Kirishima, moving as if to grab his empty beer can—but subsequently found his arms pinned behind his back. “Trying to run away, are we?”

“I—am *not*! I was trying to get my beer is all…!”

“Fess up.”

“No. Way.”

“If you don’t—I’m afraid I’ll have to kiss it out of you.”

“What the hell kind of threat is th—” Twisting around in astonishment at how much they sounded like a flirty couple just now, Yokozawa quickly found his lips captured just as Kirishima had sworn. His breath was taken away by the kiss as his lips were practically molested. “What—are you doing?”

“I just assumed that not confessing was your way of saying you wanted to be kissed.”

“Don’t just make your own assumptions like that!”

“Did you not like it?”

“That’s not something you do out here in the open.” It was one thing if they’d been in Kirishima’s bedroom—but this was the living room where they shared meals and played with Hiyori. He didn’t want to associate anything other than a normal, everyday atmosphere with this place.

“Ah~ it’s fine. Hiyori falls asleep quick.”

“It’s *not* fine. It’s important to make distinctions in this type of situation. Maybe it’d be fine tonight—but you never know when something might go wrong in the future.”

“You sure are hard-headed when it comes to stuff like this—though I gotta say I love that about you.”

“……”

Just as he was wondering if he should shy away from the lips that had drawn close again, though, Hiyori’s voice drifted in: “Papa!”

"…….?!" Yokozawa tore himself away from Kirishima just as their lips had been about to brush. Fortunately, they'd been nearly sitting on the floor by now and had thus been shielded from view by the sofa, so there was no way Hiyori had spotted them.

A stark contrast to Yokozawa, who was trying to keep his heart from feeling as if it were about to leap from his throat, Kirishima pasted on a cool, unruffled expression. "What's up?"

Fidgeting with herself, Hiyori approached Kirishima, who'd slowly situated himself back sitting properly on the sofa. "Umm do you think…you can get a picture of Yuki-chan from the video we took…?"

"Sure—she should just call us up tomorrow and let me know where to grab the image. I'll teach you how to use the camera's software."

"Yay! Thanks, Papa! I'll text Yuki-chan and let her know, then! G'night, you two!" Her worries dispelled, Hiyori flashed them a bright smile and returned to her room.

Yokozawa released the breath he'd been holding at the sudden interruption and felt the tension flow from his body. He felt as if he'd just lost a good ten years off his life from the past five minutes.

"Whew, that was a close one~"

Yokozawa tossed a glare towards Kirishima, who despite his words didn't seem to be feeling one bit worried in the least. "Don't give me that *close one* shit. That's why I said we can't do that kind of thing out here!" He kept his complaints to a softer register to ensure that Hiyori didn't over hear them.

At this, Kirishima crouched low to bring his face closer to Yokozawa's, offering almost in a whisper, "You were totally up for it, though."

"*Who* was…!" But his vision blurred when he admitted to himself that the accusation was…not entirely unfounded. If he'd truly not wanted it, he could have easily protested much more fiercely.

"…So? Shall we continue where we left off?"

"Like hell!" Yokozawa snapped, tone sharp, and shrugged off the hand Kirishima had laid on his shoulder.

"All right then, that concludes this month's print-run decision meeting. Thank you very much, and I look forward to seeing you all again next month."

As Yokozawa called the meeting to a close, all members present rose from their seats to leave. Today's meeting had wound up going relatively smoothly, ending with little in the way of troubles or issues.

Casting a glance down at his watch, Yokozawa noted that they'd finished remarkably early. With this, he could now be assured of a chance to *talk*, and he glanced over at Kirishima, who was seated diagonally across from him.

"…!"

But even though typically, Kirishima would be the one to meet his eyes and stare at Yokozawa until he grew uncomfortable and turned away, this time it was *Kirishima* who first averted his gaze—adding insult to injury by darting out of the meeting room with an incomprehensible bitter expression.

"…*Shit*, he got away…"

"Did you say something?" At Yokozawa's muttered curse, Henmi seated at his side turned a puzzled face up at him.

"Just—talking to myself. Can you take care of the rest yourself?"

"Well, yes, but—are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah, sorry; take these documents and head on back without me." And with that vague excuse, he stood in place and moved to chase down Kirishima. "What the hell is his problem…"

Kirishima had been acting strange all morning. He'd take every opportunity he had to glance over at Yokozawa—but he hadn't *once* made a move to actually come around and bother him in person. Yokozawa had hoped that, with the meeting finished, they'd finally have a chance to talk, but the guy had once again given him the slip.

Shuffling down the hallway past several other coworkers, he finally caught up to Kirishima, standing alone in front of the elevator. "Oi!"

Kirishima turned around at his voice, but his usual smile was nowhere to be seen. “Hm? What is it?” It was altogether quite unsettling.

“We need to talk.”

“Then—can it wait? I’ve got plans right now.”

Yokozawa felt a pang of irritation rise up within him at the way Kirishima purposefully glanced down at his watch. “The meeting finished early; surely you’ve got at least ten minutes free.”

“I just remembered something I had to do, so—”

“Give me a break—get in here.” And before anyone could try to stop them, he shoved Kirishima into the nearest free meeting room. Shutting the door behind them, he placed himself directly in front of it so Kirishima couldn’t run away.

“What the hell are you being all pushy for?”

“That’s my line! You’ve been avoiding me all morning… Did I do something?”

That’s what he’d been worried about, really. He knew he had an admittedly rather curt way of speaking and could easily hurt someone without realizing it. It wasn’t impossible that he’d said something unthinkingly hurtful.

“I—no, it’s…it’s not like that…” As Yokozawa stared at him, Kirishima’s face melted into the same uncomfortable expression he’d worn earlier, and he averted his gaze.

Yokozawa had learned that, whenever Kirishima felt cornered, he always tended to turn his eyes just up and to the side—this meant he was hiding something. Confirming this now, he continued to press his case: “Then what *is* it like?”

“Just—it’s nothing you need to worry about, okay? In fact, I’d say it’s my own problem…”

“Why the hell would you need to avoid *me* because something’s wrong with *you*?”

“I can’t…really explain it right now.” Kirishima’s cagey way of making excuses was really starting to wear on Yokozawa. If he’d done something wrong, he really would’ve preferred the guy just come out and say so already.

“Aren’t you a regular *genius* at quibbling over stupid things?”

"Hey—don't call it *quibbling*. Call it…making my case, emphatically. And—anyways, it's really nothing. But, I'll come out and say this in advance: I didn't do it on purpose. I just…happened to see it, is all." He continued to dance around the point of the conversation, offering nothing but excuses.

Finally, Yokozawa could take the irritation no more, and he raised his voice, "If you've got something to say, *just spit it out*!"

"I'm sorry! I really didn't mean to see it!" Kirishima suddenly pressed his palms together in front of his face, in a clearly apologetic gesture. But—just being apologized to did absolutely nothing to clear up the *reason*.

"…I still don't understand what you're sorry *for* though."

"…It's that damned card, from the Field Day event," he finally muttered, but failed to expound any further.

"Card…?"

"You know: when you ran for me in that race."

"What race are you… *Ah!*" And now, he finally understood what this whole apology thing was about. At Hiyori's Field Day, Yokozawa had run the Pick-up Race in Kirishima's place as her guardian. It seemed that Kirishima had somehow seen what was written on the card Yokozawa had picked up in that race. They'd refused to tell Kirishima what was written on the card, meaning to keep it a secret between Yokozawa and Hiyori, but…

"When I went to bring Hiyori's folded laundry into her room, it fell off of her bookshelf on accident. It was only after I picked it up that I realized it was *that* card." He was probably babbling like a criminal confessing to a crime he hadn't even been accused of out of sheer guilt. "I mean—I seriously thought it just said '*family*' or something! I…never would've expected *that* to be written on it…"

"……."

The fact that he was being so implicit in his manner of speaking…meant that he'd figured out what it meant that *he'd* been the first person Yokozawa looked to upon seeing the word on the card: *most important person*. Thinking back on it even now, his unthinking action had been downright *embarrassing*.

Yokozawa opened his mouth to say his piece before Kirishima could tease him for it—but when he looked up, he realized Kirishima was *blushing.* In an effort to shake off the awkward atmosphere, he ran a hand through his hair. "Geez, what're *you* getting all red-faced for?"

"No, it's just…I can't really…look you in the face right now."

"Huh?"

"I can't help it! I never would've imagined you'd think something like that is all…"

"What're you…" Seeing Kirishima get all worked up over this whole thing wound up making Yokozawa's own face slowly heat up. It seemed feeling uncharacteristically embarrassed at his actions had rendered Kirishima unable to look Yokozawa square on.

Under normal circumstances, this would've been the point where Yokozawa offered him a swift rejection with, *'What the hell are you doing spouting shit that doesn't suit you?'*, but perhaps Kirishima's embarrassment was contagious, for he found himself unable to form words just at the moment.

At a loss for what to say, the pair just stared down at their feet in mutual silence—and the one to break this uncomfortable atmosphere between them turned out to be a tactless little interloper.

"Oh *there* you are, Yokozawa-san!"

"He—Henmi…"

It seemed Henmi had taken no notice of the strange atmosphere permeating the meeting room and continued to babble along at his own speed. "I've been looking all over for you! I needed to ask you about the…eh? What're you doing in here? Both your faces are flushed—the thermostat isn't broken, is it?"

"It's nothing. Let's go, Henmi!"

"Eh? Wa—wait! I was the one who came to find *you*!"

This time it was Yokozawa's turn to turn tail and run, and he quickly slipped out of the meeting room.

His racing heart was unlikely to be quieted any time soon.

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## The Case of Sorata

My name is Sorata. I'm a black and white short-hair, and I happen to think my coat is quite fabulous. While I'd admittedly like to be a bit slimmer, I love delicious food too much to help it.

The one who gave me this name was a boy called Saga Masamune, who picked me up and took me home one rainy day. Well, Saga *used* to be his name—but due to certain difficult circumstances, now he's known as 'Takano'.

He never told me why he named me 'Sorata', but I quite like it.

A lot has happened since that day, though, and before I knew it, my owner had changed—and I now find myself under the care of a man called Yokozawa Takafumi. He's foul-mouthed and scary at first glance, but to me he's a very kind owner. Still, he's extremely stubborn, and the way he lets himself jump to conclusions is really troubling: if there's some food I like, he'll go out of his way to buy nothing but that for a while (sometimes I want to eat something different!), and if there's a toy I seem to enjoy, then similar ones will start piling up around the apartment (there's such a thing as too many balls! Bring out some foxtail now and then~).

Then, the other day, he found me sulking after I missed a jump I'd been trying to make and fallen from the desk and jumped to some wild conclusion thinking I was sick!

No matter how hard I tried to communicate that I was *just fine, dammit!* he still wouldn't listen to me, and I wound up getting dragged by the flustered guy to the vet's office. Geez, he could stand to be less of a frantic worrywart… Though, well, I suppose that's one of Yokozawa's good points, too.

Plus, thanks to that, I was lucky enough to get to see the vet I really love for the first time in a while! I hate getting shots, but his hands feel really good~

And also, the best part of that day…was getting to meet Hiyo.

This is just between you and me, but…the moment I set eyes on Hiyo, I fell in love with her.

I used to make fun of the notion of love at first sight, but now I know it's really, truly possible.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her when she introduced herself to me, and when she pet me with her little hands, it was heavenly.

It was all thanks to Yokozawa that I got to meet Hiyo. When I think about it that way, I realize that his frantic nature isn't all that bad.

"Sora-chan! Sorry for the wait!"

Hiyo turns back towards me after closing her notebook on her desk and putting it away on the shelf.

"Meow~"

"I'm gonna turn out the lights, Sora-chan! G'night~"

I follow after her towards her bed and curl up under the futon with her, snuggling close together as we fall asleep, my little heart beating pitter-patter for my very first, secret love.

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## The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi 2 ~ Chapter 2

After wrapping up a particularly troublesome matter, Yokozawa decided to head over to the smoke lounge for a breather—when he caught the sound of a conversation. Initially intending to just pass by, he froze up at a name which casually popped up in the chatter, and he found his feet drawing up short to a stop.

"That reminds me—I heard the other day that Kirishima-san's birthday is next Friday!"

"Where'd you hear that?"

When he surreptitiously attempted to check out the speakers, he found they were two female members of the editing team for a listings magazine. One of them he recognized as a face he'd seen hanging around Kirishima quite a bit recently; despite the fact that her department was on a completely different floor, she often used the excuse of sharing any goodies she received to make her way to the shounen manga

floor. It was with enough frequency that even Yokozawa, himself a member of the sales department, had taken notice, so she probably was visiting rather often.

The women around the office had been riled up ever since Kirishima had taken off his wedding ring. Rumors had flown, but one had finally gotten up the courage to be the sacrificial lamb and learned that while he had been married with a child, his spouse had passed away quite some time before. With that out in the open, the invitations from women had flooded in unceasingly. Some had even had the gall to try and use *Yokozawa himself*, known throughout Marukawa as a wild bear and usually avoided, as an excuse to get closer—women with ambition were amazing, that much was obvious.

While Kirishima had gone along with some of the invitations easily enough initially, these days he'd taken to turning down almost every one. But when some refused to back down even at the excuse that his daughter would get lonely, it wasn't uncommon to find him sulking in irritation behind the scenes.

And *that* was when some of the sharper ones had latched on to a new theory as to why he'd suddenly changed his tune: he'd found someone new, and *that* was why he'd removed his ring and held off from going out drinking so much.

The first time Yokozawa had heard that theory in the break room—he'd nearly spit out his coffee. Women could be *crazily* sharp sometimes.

"Our editor-in-chief mentioned it. When it came up that among those his age, Kirishima-san's birthday was the earliest in the year, I did a little snooping and…"

"What?! You're seriously going to try and nab him?"

"Hey, I've liked him for a long time! I gave up because I assumed he had a wife, but if he's single, then there's no harm in making a move, right?"

"So you really *are* serious, huh? But—didn't you hear he has a kid in elementary school? Even if he *is* single, that throws a wrench in the works a bit."

"It's a little girl, right? I'm sure we'd get along great—it'd work out fine! Maybe I could get close to the daughter…and then get in good with her father, you think?"

Yokozawa could feel himself getting irritated with their fervent chatter; it was one thing to have honest feelings for Kirishima himself, but another entirely to use his daughter to get to him, and the very idea didn't sit well with him at all.

“Hmm, you really think it’d be *that* easy?”

“And—hey! His birthday happens to fall on the last day of the cycle, right? I could invite him out under the pretense of having a little post-submission celebration, then on our way home, I could pass him a little present all casual-like! Might give me some points in his eyes, don’t you think? Hey—what do you think he’d like?”

Eavesdropping like this was hardly appropriate, and he wasn’t exactly enjoying the conversation anyways—so Yokozawa quietly slipped away.

“Still, his birthday, huh…”

He’d gotten a spare key and somehow managed to become practically part of their family, but this was the first Yokozawa had heard that Kirishima’s birthday was the following week. Their typical conversations usually revolved around either Hiyori or Sorata, after all. Thinking back, they hardly ever talked about themselves…

Sometimes they’d discuss how their workflows were going, or celebrate one of Kirishima’s authors’ works selling particularly well, or casually bring up future plans and proposals for the office—but that was about it.

However, while it wasn’t as if he’d deliberately been considering Kirishima’s birthday initially—now that he knew when it was, he couldn’t bring himself to ignore it. But—what the hell was he supposed to get the guy?

*‘I wish I hadn’t heard…’*

If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t be as worried about this as he was. He had a taste for wine, but he was hardly a heavy drinker, and Yokozawa had never heard him mention anything in particular he wanted, as he seemed to have few material desires. The last thing he remembered the guy saying *I’ve got to buy this!* was probably something along the lines of detergent or toilet paper or some other household item. If he were a suit-wearing type, it’d be easy enough to gift him a necktie—but the only time he wore ties was probably at fancy parties.

With no intention of letting Kirishima know how much he was getting worked up over trying to think of a present for him, he could hardly ask the guy himself.

“No helping it. Guess I’ll have to ask Hiyo then…”

There was no sense in working himself into a rut—it would be better to seek help from an advisor. With that, he quickly pulled out his cell phone and called up her e-mail address.

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Kirishima held up his coffee cup. “Nice to actually be on the same page for once.”

“We always put out suitable numbers; it’s the people over in *your* division always gambling away.”

The print-run decision meeting that had just ended had gone relatively smoothly. Most all the series involved had been continuations of previous prints, so it’d been relatively simple to crunch the numbers—but given that they often traded opinions on subjects outside of the meeting room, Yokozawa now found it quite easy to come to an agreement on any given topic.

*‘Sure would be nice if it always went this smoothly…’*

Even Henmi, who’d been charged with running the meeting, had expressed his surprise over and over at how unbelievable it was for a meeting not to erupt in angry shouting.

“The publication business is just one big gamble anyways. No one can tell what’ll sell if they print it. Isn’t it good enough that we came to an agreement?”

While he couldn’t bring himself to completely agree with Kirishima’s view, it wasn’t as if he had any issues with the numbers they’d eventually decided on. Besides—he had much heavier things on his mind right now than simple comic books.

He still had yet to decide on a present to give Kirishima for the birthday he’d just learned about—and despite the fact that it was just three days away now, he didn’t even have a *clue* as to what to get. When he’d consulted Hiyori, she’d simply explained how she’d given her father a bouquet, a portrait, and a card the previous year—none of which suited Yokozawa in the least.

“……”

Sipping his coffee, he raked a tentative gaze over Kirishima, wondering if he might be able to draw out some hint. He wasn’t the type to wear any sort of accessories, and any hobbies really only amounted to ‘reading.’ However, as he was a much more

avid reader than Yokozawa, there was little hope of his being able to recommend any particularly worthy books for the guy to read.

Noticing Yokozawa's gaze on him, Kirishima glanced up from where he'd been reviewing his cell phone screen. "…Something on your mind?"

"N—no, nothing really." He flinched at the suspicious expression directed his way. Hoping to somehow escape from the eyes that felt as if they could see exactly what he was thinking, he glanced over towards the window.

But Kirishima chose not to pursue the now-silent Yokozawa any further, and he snapped his phone shut. "Well, whatever. But if you're worried about something—don't sit there and hold it in yourself."

"Y—yeah." He barely held himself back from snapping *you're the reason I'm worked up like this anyways* and instead took another sip of his coffee to divert attention.

There was no way he could discuss this with the guy himself, and he held back a deep sigh—when there came a *clinking* sound of metal hitting the floor followed by Kirishima's soft cursing.

"Shit…guess this is about it huh…"

"What's wrong?"

"The mounting bracket on my keycase is shot to pieces. Figures, though—I've had it for ages." He bent to the floor and picked up his leather keycase—and the small piece of broken metal, onto which was attached his keys. It seemed he'd dropped it when he'd gone to pull something out of his pocket.

"You attached to it or something?"

"I bought it with my first bonus, a year after joining the company. It was really easy to use, to I tried to take good care of it—but now it's all beat up, so I figure it's time to change."

Explaining thus, he made an effort to rejoin the small piece of metal to the leather case, obviously still intending to continue using it.

"Should you take off the keys, maybe? What'll you do if they fall off somewhere?"

"It should hold a little longer if I can just close this joint here. Not like I've got a ton of time to go shopping or anything, after all."

"Yeah, I guess not." He probably wouldn't have any free time until the cycle ended. No matter how quickly he managed to finish, it would always be too late for stores to still be open.

"…Ah!"

"What?"

"Oh—no, it's nothing. Just—remembered some work I had to do," he mumbled as an excuse, and quickly made to leave the break room. Once safely out of Kirishima's sight, he stepped up his pace: he *had it*. The conversation just now had sealed it. He was getting the guy a *key case* for his birthday. If he could just find one about the same size and make as the one Kirishima was using right now, there shouldn't be any problem.

Thankfully, salespeople's work often took them outside the building, and he decided to use his lunch break to do a bit of shopping.

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Having finished replying to all his messages, Yokozawa powered down his computer and began to organize his desk, making his preparations to leave for the day. He moved to slide his work folder into his briefcase—but his hand stilled just before doing so. If he shoved the thing in like usual, the gift wrapped item snugly inside would be crushed. Gently removing the present and placing it on his desk, he slipped the folder inside.

The present he'd somehow managed to prepare against all odds was for Kirishima. He'd ducked into a department store between rounds to the bookstores and finally spotted the brand Kirishima favored. He'd picked out a case that matched Kirishima's current one in shape and color. While it'd been a bit pricey for Yokozawa's tastes, when he considered that it was meant to be used a long time, he supposed the price wasn't so entirely unreasonable. Now all that was left was to hope that Kirishima liked it…

"Yokozawa-san, Kirishima-san's on the line for you."

"Ah—right." He'd wavered at the eerie timing, but quickly schooled his features so as not to give himself away. Taking a deep breath, he picked up the receiver and pressed the button for his extension. "Yes, this is Yokozawa."

*"Ah, Yokozawa? Sorry—it looks like it's gonna be a late one tonight. Head on home for me? I already let Hiyo know."*

While it wasn't unexpected, it seemed this submission was going to be a photo-finish as well. "Again, seriously? Can't you ever manage to give yourself some leeway with this kind of thing?"

*"If I could, I wouldn't be editor-in-chief for long—oh, yeah, I'll look at that in a minute. Leave it here.—Anyways, do this for me?"*

It was obvious from his conversation that he hadn't stopped working even long enough for a simple phone call. He probably looked like utter shit on the other end of the line. "Yeah yeah, take it easy over there."

*"Right—I'll see you later."*

In some ways, it was a blessing they wouldn't be able to leave together; he'd actually been planning a little party together with Hiyori, and his job had been to somehow purchase a cake without Kirishima noticing. Plus for dinner—there was Hiyori's special curry.

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"So *this* is what you two have been sneaking around doing for the past few days…" Despite the late hour at which he'd returned home, Kirishima's lips quirked up in amusement at the more splendid than usual dinner table and Hiyori's decorations.

"Hehe! It was rough trying to keep it a secret from you!"

"Thanks, Hiyo—I love it!"

"You're very welcome~" While she typically grew embarrassed at having her hair ruffled like a child, today the action only seemed to evoke joy in her face. She must've been pleased as punch that her and Yokozawa's plan had gone off so well. "And Oniichan bought the cake!"

"I see—well then thank you also, Yokozawa."

“It’s your birthday after all—what’s that without a cake? Oh…also, here.”

He’d thought about giving it after Hiyori had gone to bed, but on realizing that’d just make the whole thing even harder to go through with, he steeled himself and thrust the present towards Kirishima.

“Huh?”

“Just *take it* already!”

“You…got me a *present*?” His surprise at the box in Yokozawa’s palm was evident in his eyes.

“What else does it look like?!”

“No, it’s just—I…never would’ve thought you’d get me anything, so I was surprised… Can I open it?”

Yokozawa glanced away, embarrassed and unable to meet Kirishima’s overjoyed expression. “Do whatever you want. …Just, you said the one you were using was broken, so…”

“—*Shit.*”

“Huh?”

“Yesterday, I…kind of bought the same thing,” Kirishima mumbled bitterly, pulling from his own pocket a brand new key case. It was a different color, but the shape was exactly the same as the one Yokozawa had bought.

Yokozawa quickly recovered from being shocked speechless, launching into a veritable tirade without thinking. “What the *hell*—you said you didn’t have any time to go shopping!”

“I had to go pick up a manuscript from an author yesterday, and when I stopped to get some refreshments, I had a look around. They had one I really liked, so I snatched it right up…” He was scratching his head, looking rather put out himself.

If *this* was how it was going to end—Yokozawa would’ve been better off just asking the guy what he wanted in the beginning, he figured. This whole mess was the result

of him trying to surprise Kirishima in the first place. *'Why am I always so damned unlucky…?'*

The timing was admittedly bad, to be sure, but it couldn't really be helped that they'd doubled up on presents. Given that it was unused, he could probably return it or exchange it at least. Just as he was considering suggesting they go back to the store together so Kirishima could pick out something himself, Kirishima's face lit up.

"Hey! How about you use the one I bought, then, and I'll use the one you bought me?"

"*Huh*?"

“It’ll be like a gift exchange. That way there’s no problem, right?” With this, he unlatched his line of keys from the case and passed it towards Yokozawa.

“*Exchange*…but why the hell should I get a gift?”

“Think of it as a thank you for taking care of us all the time—here, gimme your keys.” Without waiting for his response, Kirishima snatched up Yokozawa’s bag and rifled around inside, glancing at the contents.

“Hey—! Don’t just go through my stuff without asking!” He moved to take back the bag, but Kirishima found what he was looking for before then.

“Here we are—” He removed Yokozawa’s keys from their holder and attached them to the fixtures in the key case one by one. “Oh—*right*. And while we’re at it, gimme a spare key to your place, too.”

“And why exactly should I give you a key?”

“Cause it’s useful if something should ever happen.”

He wanted to ask just what the hell this hypothetical *something* was, but he didn’t want to get into an argument in front of Hiyori. But as he swallowed his protests, Hiyori came from behind with a fatal strike:

“Man, that’s nice… Now you match!”

“*Ma*—?!”

Maybe it was fine for *girls* to do it, but for two men to share a matching item was just pathetic. While they’d simply bought the same item in different colors by pure chance, touting this as the truth would be difficult indeed.

“What the hell’re we gonna do if anyone at work notices…?”

“Just tell them we’re *~madly in love~*“

“*Madly in*—who the *hell* is gonna say something like that?!” Yokozawa’s voice broke at the unexpected, embarrassing suggestion thrown his way. Sure, Kirishima could probably pass it off as a joke saying that sort of thing, but if Yokozawa so much as breathed a hint of something like that, people would probably just look at him like he was feverish.

“Come on, don’t *blush*.”

“I’m *not*!” But Kirishima and Hiyori just shared a loud laugh at his beet-red face.

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## Chapter 3

The moment he stepped out from the air-conditioned store, Yokozawa Takafumi’s entire body was wrapped up in sticky, heavy air. The hot days had been piling up since July had started, but today was *particularly* nasty. Only a few days before, he’d grown unable to bear it anymore and shifted his wardrobe to short-sleeved shirts for the summer, but walking around outside for any length of time had him dripping in sweat.

His suit jacket, draped across his left arm, hadn’t touched his body once the whole day, and while he was now free from the blazing sun with evening setting in, the humidity still made it difficult to breathe.

At this rate, he was worried how August would turn out; he was already fed up with this heat that was setting temperature records left and right this year.

“Man, I need a beer!”

“Yeah, let’s hit up a beer garden!”

A group of businessmen seemingly on their way home from the office passed in front of Yokozawa, their conversation a perfect lens for his own thoughts. Swallowing the temptation, though, he instead took out his cell phone and placed a call to the office.

*“Yes, this is the Marukawa Shoten Sales Department.”*

The perky voice of his subordinate floated over the receiver. Given the background noise, he was able to divine that most of his coworkers were still at the office. “Henmi? It’s Yokozawa.”

*“Ah, excellent work today!”*

“I just finished up at the book store. Did anything happen while I was out?”

*"No, not particularly. How are things on your end?"*

"Got 'em to agree to help out with the fair. I'll get you the details early next week. I don't have anything else I need to get done today, so I'm gonna head straight home. Would you mind noting it on the board?" It was well past quitting time, and he didn't have any drinking sessions scheduled with his superiors or clients.

*"Understood!"*

"Well then, I'm off." He cut the line with Henmi here and tugged on his tie to loosen it as he headed toward the station.

While he'd said he was *heading straight home*—he wasn't *actually* heading to his own apartment, and as he snapped his phone shut, he suddenly remembered being told to call when he was through with work.

They were headed in the same direction, so Yokozawa didn't really see the point, honestly, in meeting up halfway there—but it would be pathetic having to deny it when the guy inevitably teased him with a smirk, *What, too embarrassed to head home together?*, and he was left feeling undecided. With a bit of hesitation, he dialed up the number on his phone, and after a few rings, the line connected.

"Uh…it's me."

He always worried how best to start their phone conversations these days. Sure, he probably should've greeted the guy just like he would with any work-related call, but even that was still a little awkward for some reason. Naturally, he used polite speech, as expected, during meetings and the like—nothing had changed in the way they spoke to one another under such circumstances. But calling up Kirishima for a private conversation like this still left him with a sense of unease.

*"Good work today. You finished?"*

"Yeah; we actually finished quicker than I expected."

The voice on the other end of the line was that of Kirishima Zen, the editor-in-chief of *Monthly Japun*. Kirishima was the managing editor for Ijuuin Kyou, the mangaka who gave life to Marukawa Shoten's above-and-beyond bombastic sales hit, *Za Kan*. One couldn't help but be impressed with not only his prowess as an editor himself but also as an editor-in-chief with the charisma to pull together a team of such individualistic editors. While Yokozawa did admittedly think the guy was

occasionally too overeager when it came to his work, it was likely that very quality that had these fussy authors placing their utmost faith in him—and while Yokozawa had never been able to bring himself to say as much, he held the utmost respect for the guy when it came to his career.

People often said that God never granted anyone two gifts—but when it came to Kirishima, he'd not only blessed with an immaculate work ethic but also equally pleasing packaging. With height to rival Yokozawa's, a fresh, shapely face, and a decently balanced body, he possessed a youthful air that often made it difficult to peg him as the mid-30s he was in age—and Yokozawa had never, not *once*, seen him ruffled at work, always surrounded by an air of complete control. And lately…he'd started to realize how coolly and calmly beautiful that voice was that fell from those slender lips—irritating as it was, there was no arguing that that voice whispering by his ear went *right* to his hips.

…Still, the guy was *far* from perfect. In fact, if Yokozawa had to pick one thing he couldn't stand, it would have to be that personality.

While he rarely showed it on the surface, Kirishima had some annoying little hobbies and was unabashed in the fact that, *I love teasing proud people*. Yokozawa had apparently been a target of such teasing and occasionally found himself being 'toyed' with. Still, despite knowing full well that he was simply being played with *because* of how he overreacted, Yokozawa's undoing was his complete inability to keep a poker face in such situations.

Kirishima, to his credit, at least seemed to understand his limits, and he never made any moves or said anything to truly piss off Yokozawa, which essentially left Yokozawa as the perfect toy, finding himself unable to *really* get angry with Kirishima.

It had been five months prior that he'd first started to get close to Kirishima in this way. Before then, they'd never even spoken outside of work, and even now Yokozawa occasionally reflected how strange their current relationship was in that respect.

It had been a broken heart that brought him and Kirishima together.

After having his long unabandoned feelings soundly put to an end, Kirishima had appeared just as he was settling in to feeling sorry for himself. While there was still a lot he didn't remember about that night, he believed it was because Kirishima had been there for him that he'd managed to get through it without completely

snapping. It was mortifying now, remembering how he'd let himself get wasted to try and escape the pain—but he consoled himself by reminding himself that the fact that he could feel that way *period* was in itself a sign of how much he'd recovered.

*"You certainly sound happy; did something good happen?"*

The low voice floating over the receiver ghosted over his eardrum—speaking with Kirishima on the phone like this was…strange, almost like having the guy *right there*, whispering into his ear. He'd never felt like this in phone conversations before—and he couldn't decide if it was because it was Kirishima speaking or the *way* he was speaking that was doing it. Plus—it was hardly something he could get another's opinion on, so he couldn't even determine if it was just himself left feeling this way or what.

"Actually—the shop was totally on-board with putting on that fair. It was all thanks to you that it went so smoothly. You really helped me out." Indeed, the reason the shop had agreed to go through with it had been wholly because he'd been able to secure a firm promise of cooperation from the author regarding autographed books, illustrations to be used for goods, and new work excerpts—and working all of that into the schedule of the moody, dizzyingly busy author had been solely Kirishima's doing.

Yokozawa knew that even if he hadn't stepped in to ask for the fair, the work would have sold perfectly well—but as a salesman, his priority was always to sell *more*. Sitting around doing nothing when there was room for growth was just careless—that was how the salesman in Yokozawa saw it.

*"I didn't do anything; this is all happening because of the author's cooperation and your hard work. Good for you."*

"All—all I did was what I was supposed to do." People rarely praised Yokozawa like this. While he knew he worked twice as hard as anyone else and had the results to prove it, he probably wasn't exactly the type of person who invited such compliments. But Kirishima tossed out comments like that without a second thought, so straightforward it actually made the other party feel embarrassed instead. Yokozawa wondered if he'd *ever* grow used to that aspect of his personality.

*"Geez, haven't I told you to just take your compliments like a man? Or what—do you* want *me to tease you, then?"*

"Who the hell said *that*? Fine, whatever—I'll take what I can get." Why couldn't he just say *thank you*? Sometimes he acted like a stubborn little grade-schooler—the realization of which did absolutely nothing to spur him into action, unfortunately.

Working hard was a given; it wasn't as if he was doing this job because he craved recognition. Still…getting that recognition was kind of nice—and that it came from someone he himself respected? Even better.

*"So what now? You coming back here?"* Kirishima didn't seem bothered in the least by Yokozawa's contrary response, and while Yokozawa had often wondered if such reactions were because he could see right through Yokozawa to his true nature, he'd chalked that up to being overly self-conscious. It was likely simply a matter of not being worth the effort of pursuing to Kirishima.

“No; I’m heading straight home now. I can probably make it in about a half an hour…?”

*“Then—how about we meet at the convenience store in front of the station by my place? I’m about to leave the office myself. You’ll probably get there first, so wait for me?”*

“All right.”

Having decided where to meet, Yokozawa ended the conversation, arriving at the nearest station just as he turned off his phone. These days, he spent his weekends at the Kirishimas’ apartment, and while he didn’t much like the idea of overstaying his welcome, he found himself always nodding his assent whenever Kirishima’s daughter Hiyori would see him off with, “See ya next time!”

Yokozawa’s cat Sorata had been the reason he’d started spending so much time there; when Sorata had been sick, Hiyori had somehow been charged with looking after him, which had subsequently led to Yokozawa also finding himself in their care. Since then, Sorata had taken to Hiyori remarkably well, and now he was a permanent fixture in the Kirishima home; when he greeted Yokozawa at the door these days, he looked like he had the total run of the place.

After picking up a treat for Hiyori from the underground shopping area, Yokozawa headed for the train platforms, stepping into a car that was jam-packed with commuters headed home in the evening rush. Angling himself to keep the treat he’d just bought from being crushed, he managed to find a spot between two other travelers—and while it wasn’t a full car, it was fairly impossible to move without jostling anyone else, leaving Yokozawa feeling that it might have been more comfortable to be stuffed in a sardine can.

The air-conditioner was probably on, but given the sheer mass of humanity packed into the car, it was humid and suffocating. Yokozawa, being a good head taller than most others around him, had an easier time breathing, but it did nothing to change how *hot* it was. He reached up to grab hold of one of the bars hanging down from a strap to help keep himself from swaying with the train, and spotted a young woman standing just diagonal to him with a sullen expression.

“…?”

Perhaps she was just feeling ill from the heat; she was clinging tightly to the railing next to the door, and her face was stiff. Reflecting that it would have been fine, likely,

had she had just a little more room to breathe around her, Yokozawa only belatedly noticed the real reason the young woman looked so pale.

A man—a businessman, from the looks of him—was standing just behind her, leaning against her far more than could be naturally expected in such a situation, and with each sway of the train, he leaned in all the more, subtly brushing along her the hand he had casually settled at his side.

From Yokozawa's angle, it was difficult to see clearly—and since he hadn't obviously witnessed a crime, he wasn't quite sure how to raise his voice—until he caught the man sliding his hand slowly along the young woman's thigh.

"…Just what the *hell* do you think you're doing?" The moment he witnessed such a cowardly act, anger welled up within him, and he shoved aside the other passengers to twist the man's hand out of the way.

"Wha—what's the meaning of this?!" The car erupted into murmurs before immediately quieting down again, and the other passengers held their breath in silent watch as Yokozawa confronted the man.

Caring little about their gawking stares, Yokozawa narrowed his eyes and spit out, "That's what I'd like to know. You were just feeling up this young woman, weren't you?"

"Of—of course not! I'll thank you not to make such wild accusations!"

"Then how about we ask *her*? If that wasn't the case, I'll gladly apologize—so? Did he touch you?"

"Yes, he…he did…" Her voice was little louder than a buzzing mosquito, but it was a clear confession, and she cut a glare at the man through eyes clouded over with fear and anger.

Now it was the man's turn to flush pale, and perhaps having determined that things were about to get much worse with his victim's confession just now, the man began babbling out stubborn excuses, eyes swimming. "The—the train was just really packed, and I accidentally touched her, that was all! I didn't do it on purpose!"

"If it wasn't on purpose, how the hell did I manage to spot your hand from where I was standing? Sounds a little strange, doesn't it? Either way—you're getting off at the next station."

“Like I said—there were *reasons* for—”

“—And I’ll be happy to listen to them. Could I get you to get off at the next station as well…?”

“Oh—of course!”

The train drew to a stop a moment later, and Yokozawa dragged the man onto the platform. However, while the passengers who’d ridden with them gave them a wide berth as they disembarked, the passengers from surrounding cars who had no idea of the situation began to flood in around them, and Yokozawa tried to drag the man to the far end of the platform so as not to obstruct the flow.

“Let me go—!!”

“*Oww*! Hey, WAIT!”

In the one moment that he let himself get distracted by the crowd around them, the man seized his chance, scratching harshly at the back of Yokozawa’s hand and throwing off the arm that held him fast as he made a break for it. Making every effort to lose himself in the crowd, he quickly faded further and further away from Yokozawa.

“You bastard—we’re not through yet!” Flustered, Yokozawa tried to chase him down, but he was thwarted by the crowd and quickly lost sight of the man. He tried to force his way through the crowd flowing in from the direction the man had disappeared, but it would be impossible to catch him under these circumstances.

“*Shit*.” He gave up attempting to chase down the groper and instead headed back to where he’d left the young woman. “I’m sorry…I let him get away.” Maybe he’d been a professional criminal, given how good he’d been at escaping. If Yokozawa hadn’t released his grip back then, the guy wouldn’t have been able to get away so easily, and Yokozawa silently reprimanded himself for being so naive.

“Oh, no! It was more than enough that you helped me! It’s pathetic, but I just couldn’t bring myself to raise my voice at him and…”

“Well you were scared, I’m sure. I only wish I’d noticed sooner.”

“No, no. Really—you saved me! Thank you so much!”

It was a bit unnerving the way she kept bowing her head to him, and given that he hadn't even been able to apprehend the perpetrator, he didn't feel as if he'd done anything particularly *deserving* of thanks. "C'mon, lift your head. You should probably let the station attendants know what happened. If you don't feel up to going alone, then I can come wi—what's wrong? Do I have something on my face?"

The woman, who'd been staring at Yokozawa, hesitantly asked, "I…I'm sorry if I'm mistaken, but are you by any chance…Yokozawa-san of Marukawa Shoten?"

He froze up when she pegged both his name and place of work. "I am… Have we met somewhere before?" There was no way he knew any women this young.

At his suspicious expression, the young woman immediately clarified, flustered, "Ah, I work part-time at *Books Marimo*! I've actually seen you several times…"

"Oh, I see."

Being the leading large-scale book seller in the city, *Books Marimo* employed a number of workers, including part-timers. While Yokozawa mainly associated with the employees in charge of specific genres, with little interaction with the other employees, it wasn't strange for those others to recognize him.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'm Matsumoto—I mainly work the register, so we've never actually spoken…"

"Not at all, my apologies."

"I've heard a lot about you from Yukina-kun! He told me you were a first-rate salesman!"

"D—did he now…" He was getting compliments left and right today, and being so exposed to something he wasn't used to was throwing him off. Unsure of how best to respond, his reactions were coming off dubious. Though he was more than a little curious as to just what sorts of rumors were floating around the bookshop about him, he opted not to pursue the conversation.

"Again, thank you so much for today! Ah—umm, if it's all right, please let me thank you properly some other time!"

"Don't worry about it. I only did what I should." Not to mention he'd let the perpetrator get away, which was hardly something worth being thanked over. He

appreciated the sentiment, but it still felt awkward; however, despite his efforts to politely turn her down, Matsumoto was clearly not satisfied with leaving things as they were.

“But—I just can’t accept that… I mean, I can’t do *much*, but if it’s not an inconvenience…” She trailed off, clinging fervently to a *please*, and Yokozawa finally offered a suggestion of his own.

“Then I’d appreciate it if you’d just sell a ton of Marukawa’s books; that way, my rank will go up. But—shouldn’t we go make that report now?”

“Oh, right!!” She jumped right on to the new topic of conversation, relieving Yokozawa. He was naturally thrilled she wanted to express her gratitude, but he couldn’t bring himself to presume upon a younger woman in any way.

“Then, shall we go?” The platform had emptied of most people while they’d been conversing, and together with Matsumoto, they headed for the ticket gates.

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“Damn, I’m late…”

He’d said he’d only take a half hour to get there, but nearly one hour had elapsed since he’d spoken to Kirishima on the phone. Accompanying Matsumoto to make her incident report to the station staff had taken longer than he’d expected, but after explaining the details of the incident, they’d been informed that he bore a strong resemblance to the suspect of other recent complaints, and that an investigation was currently underway. Such a base, cowardly criminal deserved to be caught as quickly as possible, and it made Yokozawa regret letting him go all the more, but there was little left to do besides leave it to the professionals.

Yokozawa dashed through the ticket gates and darted up the stairs, and as he drew close to the convenience store near the station, he found Kirishima waiting for him while reading at the magazine stand.

“Sorry I’m la—wait, *what* are you reading…?”

“*Monthly Japun*. This month’s issue is particularly good!”

“I already read the preview edition last week. And—you’re one of the people who *make* the damn thing; what’s the point of reading it now?” They checked all the

nooks and crannies that readers would never even consider before sending it to print; Yokozawa could see no point in reading it at a magazine stand.

“I figure maybe I’ll notice something by reading it from a different angle from usual.”

“You think so?”

“Well—I’m at least satisfied there were no misprints. I’m gonna go buy some milk; wait here for me.” He returned the issue of *Japun* to its place and headed over to the drink area. Just when he’d thought the guy had a decent point…he’d been kind of shocked to realize he was just checking for misprints.

Waiting for Kirishima to finish checking out, Yokozawa swept his eyes over the magazine stand. Perhaps because it was the release date, there was a rather large stack of marriage-related magazines lined up with the words ’RE-MARRIAGE SPECIAL EDITION’ in large letters. The reason a magazine regarding marriage information piqued his interest now when before he wouldn’t have given it a second thought…may have been due to the silent pressure he was receiving lately from his parents.

More than half of his friends from high school were married now, and no small number of them had children as well. Every time he received New Years cards with pictures on them, he couldn’t help being surprised at how quickly everyone was growing up. His parents had probably mostly given up on their son who’d never had a serious relationship in his life. They weren’t pushing Yokozawa in any particular way, but he knew they felt a bit jealous every time a postcard arrived letting them know one of his friends had had a baby.

And he was all but certain that the reason he felt so guilty seeing his mother like that was because he knew fully well that he wouldn’t be able to paint for his parents the future he knew they wanted.

As he released a quiet sigh, Kirishima drew up behind him, having finished checking out. “Sorry for the wait.”

“Oh, no; I was the one who made you wait, after all. You should’ve just left me a message and headed home.”

“Nah, no big deal, seeing as I’d just gotten here myself—but did something happen? Your train wasn’t late or anything, right?”

“Actually, you see…”

Yokozawa belatedly spilled the full details of the situation as they left the convenience store and headed to Kirishima’s apartment. When he brought up the cowardly actions of the groper, Kirishima’s expression darkened into one of grim anger.

“That’s just unforgivable.”

“Right? And well, the blood rushed to my head and before I knew it, I’d grabbed the guy.”

“Sounds like something straight out a television show, yanno? And while I’d be happy for all those perverts to drop dead, I gotta admit I wish I could’ve seen your gallant figure~”

“If you’d been there, you probably would’ve made a move before I could and beaten the shit out of him before the police even arrived.” Kirishima could definitely seem pretty easygoing at first glance, but the fact that he was a father, with a daughter of his own, imbued him with a strong sense of justice. It was only after entering into a relationship with Kirishima in this way that Yokozawa really noticed how fired up he could get.

“Hey, don’t be rude—there’s no way I’d do something as stupid as resort to violence. I’d probably just give him a stern talking-to, to make sure he learned his lesson.” Yokozawa wondered in the back of his mind if ‘stern talking-to’ in fact meant ‘threat’, but he let it pass. “…Hey, what happened there?”

It wasn’t a serious wound, but it was hardly pleasant having Kirishima notice the proof of Yokozawa’s disgrace, and he tried to casually hide it—but Kirishima snapped out a hand and gripped him. “It’s just—that asshole pervert scratched me up when he bolted. I lost him in the crowd.”

When Yokozawa reluctantly explained the details, Kirishima’s expression immediately turned dangerous. “Fucking bastard… If I’d been there, he wouldn’t have had the *balls* to try and make a break for it. Make sure you disinfect that when we get home.”

A chill shuddered down Yokozawa’s spine at the cold words; it was hard to tell just how serious Kirishima was being right now. In a desperate effort to dispel the heavy atmosphere, Yokozawa blithely changed subjects: “Oh, so—the chick I helped out?

Turns out she works part-time at *Books Marimo*. Apparently she'd seen me in the shop before, but I was kind of shocked to find out she recognized me."

"Small world, huh."

"Well, I was on my way home from *Marimo*, so I guess it wasn't all that much of a coincidence." He'd been a bit unsettled when she'd spoken his name, but on hearing her explanation, he could understand it. She'd probably just finished her own shift when Yokozawa had left the store. Given how much the sales reps for the publishing companies stand out, it was hardly strange for him to be recognized by unrelated store staff.

"If this were a manga—that'd be a big red flag, you know. You sure she didn't fall for you?"

He let out a snort of laughter at Kirishima's words. "Of course not." He'd be in a lot of trouble if people were prone to falling for him just for *that* kind of thing. She'd simply been presuming upon his kindness in a difficult situation, that was all.

"She didn't ask for your phone number or anything, right?"

"She *didn't*. We just made small talk on the way back, like what's selling well right now, her coworkers, that kind of thing."

"You came here *together*?"

"Her nearest station was one station over. She'd just been through something traumatic—I couldn't let her get on a packed train all by herself." She'd seemed like a really quiet girl initially, but once she got started on a book she liked, it was hard to stop her. Perhaps she'd just been thrilled to learn that her favorite authors was also one of Yokozawa's, but she'd seemed to enjoy herself quite a bit when giving her thoughts on the most recently released volume. It had just been a pointless little conversation, but if indulging her meant that she could forget what she'd just been through for even a moment, then it had been worth it. "She said she wanted to thank me, too, but I couldn't let a girl younger than me do that kind of thing, so I just told her to make sure she sells a ton of Marukawa Shoten titles. The very model of a salesman, aren't I?"

"Well I'm sure she's enthusiastic in her work and all—but you said she worked the register, didn't you? I'm sure she'll do her best—but it's hardly anything she has power over."

At Kirishima's incisive comment, Yokozawa clammed up—when he'd made the suggestion, he hadn't thought about that at all.

"…But, she might get her own section some day," he returned spitefully. Sure—if she worked there long enough, she could feasibly be placed in charge of somewhere other than the register. Even if it wasn't a comics-related area, so long as she promoted Marukawa Shoten's books, that was enough.

"Sure—she might do her best if it's for you."

He furrowed his brow at the insinuation in Kirishima's words. "What's *that* supposed to mean? If you've got something you want to say, come out and say it!" Maybe it was just his imagination, but Kirishima's manner of interaction seemed a bit different from usual today.

"…It's nothing. Geez, I'm starving! C'mon—Hiyo's waiting up for us, so let's get going."

"Hey—don't try to change the subject!"

"What do you think we'll have for dinner tonight?" Yokozawa was left unable to pin down the source of his misgivings when the subject was quickly changed. Granted, it was hardly rare for Yokozawa to find himself at the mercy of Kirishima's conduct in this manner, and if he picked fights over every little thing, there'd be no end to it. That he changed the subject so abruptly meant Kirishima didn't want to discuss the matter any further.

"……."

It was hard to get a grasp on Kirishima's feelings, given that he so rarely let himself get ruffled, and Yokozawa released a small sigh at Kirishima's profile, a perfect poker face.

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"Hiyo—you're sleepy, aren't you? I'll finish up here, so you head on to bed," Yokozawa urged, standing in the kitchen washing dishes before handing them off to be dried by Hiyori.

"I'm still okay! There's only a little bit left, so I'll stick with it til we're done."

“You’ve been yawning like crazy for a while now—don’t push yourself. You’ve got your eyes half-closed already.” As he pointed this out with a laugh, Hiyori reached up and rubbed her eyes—but a child’s fatigue can’t be dispelled so easily, and she let out another great yawn.

“Aah…AH!” Hiyori immediately looked embarrassed at the reflex she hadn’t been able to hold down, and the adorable way she tried to hide her open mouth with both hands slapped to her face drew more laughter.

Hiyori had just entered the 5th grade at school this past Spring, and given that she was the child of a single parent, she was generally remarkably well put-together; however, when she made a face like that, it was clear how much of a child she still was.

“I’ve got this handled; go get Sorata and head to your room.”

“Mmmkay, then would you mind?”

“Sure, leave it to me. I’ll make sure everything’s put away, so don’t you worry.”

“Okay! G’night, Oniichan!”

“Good night.”

Hiyori ran over to pick up Sorata, who’d been curled up on the couch, and wobbled on unsteady feet into her room. Yokozawa watched her leave with a soft smile before setting the last of the dishes into the dish rack.

“Now then…” He wiped down his wet hands with a towel and replaced the dishes Hiyori had already dried into the cupboard in the dining room. Sliding the glass door shut on the case, Yokozawa’s eye was drawn to the small, simply designed altar next to the cupboard.

It was a shrine for Kirishima’s dead wife, Sakura.

He’d heard that she’d died after her health declined following Hiyori’s birth—nothing more, and he couldn’t possibly ask further, either. The lovely woman in the pictures he saw looked just like Hiyori—in one, she was situated next to Kirishima, grinning brightly, as she held a tiny newborn Hiyori in her arms in a hospital room.

He knew they still left flowers for her, but beyond that, he'd never heard a word about her from Kirishima's mouth—which was only natural, but he couldn't fathom what on earth he had in common with the woman smiling in the picture frame.

He didn't want to press about Kirishima's past, of course, but…seeing this shrine day after day now, he couldn't help the nagging curiosity.

"……."

It had bugged him ever since he and Kirishima had grown closer in their relationship: *why* had he picked *him*?

They'd interacted occasionally at work whenever Yokozawa had been involved with one of his comics projects, but that was all there'd ever been. They certainly hadn't been close enough to ever go out drinking together, and any time they passed each other in the halls at Marukawa, they'd simply given the most basic of greetings and moved on. If they'd never run into one another in that bar that night when Yokozawa had been trying to drown his sorrows…he wouldn't be here frequenting Kirishima's home like this—and when he thought about it like that, it left him feeling…strange.

Kirishima had once told him that it had been because he saw something of himself in Yokozawa—but even so, would you usually get this involved with someone just on those grounds? He couldn't count the number of times he'd tried to ask *Are you really okay with it being me?* The one thing that had always given him pause before voicing his concerns…had probably been because he was deep down, honestly afraid of what Kirishima might say. He couldn't put his finger on *what* exactly he was afraid of, but the doubts and questions stuck in his chest like tiny little fish bones.

"What're you doing spacing out over there? The bath's open."

Yokozawa snapped back to himself at Kirishima's voice calling out to him. "Oh—right."

"You did the dishes? Thanks."

"You fed me; it was only natural. Plus—Hiyo was helping me out until just a minute ago; if you're gonna thank anyone, thank her."

"Is she asleep now?"

"Yeah; she looked exhausted, so I told her to head to bed."

"And Sorata?"

"In Hiyo's room with her." When he'd been living at Yokozawa's place, Sorata only ever curled up in bed on cold nights; but here, no matter how sweltering the night, he always slept with Hiyori. He must *really* like her…

Kirishima swiped a beer from the refrigerator and took a long swig—he was probably thirsty from the bath. "You want one, too?"

"No, I'll get one after my ba—wait, never mind. Go ahead and give me one."

"Here ya go."

"Thanks."

He just felt like drinking right now, for some reason. Taking the can Kirishima had passed him in hand, he settled down onto the sofa. He wanted to flush away some of these feelings of doubt and despair with the power of alcohol.

Pulling the tab, he lifted the can to his lips—but tonight, he couldn't enjoy the refreshment of liquid pouring down his throat, instead left with only a bitter aftertaste on his tongue.

"It's been so damn hot lately, every day… But that just makes the beer even tastier."

"Ah—hey, don't just turn down the temperature because you feel like it!" Kirishima had settled beside Yokozawa and taken up the remote control to the air-conditioner, setting the temperature down a few degrees.

"C'mon, I just got out of the bath—it's fine. It's like a *furnace* in here…"

He pulled up his t-shirt and let it flap against his skin—and Yokozawa shuddered at the soapy scent that wafted up, scolding Kirishima to hide his agitation. “Hey, don’t sit around with your hair all wet—you’ll soak the sofa.”

“You’re starting to gripe at me as much as Hiyo…”

“Whose fault is it I feel like I have to?”

“Yeah yeah, I do apologize~” He shifted forward, looking extremely put out, and started to dry his rumpled hair with the towel he’d had hanging around his neck.

“……”

Yokozawa’s heart did a flip in his chest at the sight, and for a moment—he found himself staring, captivated…because it reminded him so starkly of the moment that had started this whole relationship.

To be fair, their ‘beginning’ had been a few hours before that moment, seated next to one another in an izakaya, but Yokozawa had no clear memories of that evening. Waking up in an unfamiliar business hotel, he hadn’t believed his own eyes when Kirishima had stepped out of the bathroom.

He had never been so shocked in all his life—and while it had eventually come out that they hadn’t done anything untoward, a dozen wild theories had run through his mind in that single moment. *How far had they gone, who’d been on bottom*—he’d been so frustrated with his inability to remember *anything*. And then to have the events of that evening used as fodder for a threat? He’d been out of his mind.

Sure, he could look back on it now and actually find it somewhat amusing, but there was no telling how many years of his life he’d lost from that incident.

“Another few weeks and Hiyo’ll start Summer Vacation, huh… Guess that’s something only kids can do—take a whole month off. Maybe I’ll take a vacation too—hit up a summer resort. I’ve probably got enough paid vacation saved up…”

“Oi—if you took a month off, they wouldn’t be able to get out that rag of yours or any of your comics.” Of course Yokozawa would’ve liked to take a long vacation himself if he could, but he worried he do nothing but think of all the work piling up the whole time, and the thought of having to deal with that mountain of work set his stomach to curling uneasily.

People spoke often of the symptoms of 'workaholics'—but Yokozawa thought that definition simply branded him a typical salaryman.

"Nah, it'd be fine; they'd manage without me somehow. My subordinates are top-notch, after all. Actually—they'd probably be able to work more comfortably and put out a good product without someone hovering over them."

Yokozawa jolted at Kirishima's idle commentary—he was making these suggestions in a laughing manner, but it certainly didn't *sound* like he was kidding. "Hey—tell me you're not actually seriously *considering* taking a month's vacation, right?"

"It'd certainly be nice to get away. Oh—what time are we leaving in the morning?" The next day they were planning to go to a movie together that Hiyori had been wanting to see, with lunch and shopping on the schedule afterwards. It'd been a while since Yokozawa had been to see a movie; anytime there was a film he was interested in, the run was over before he knew it.

"Well we've got our seats reserved, so if we leave around 9, we should be fine, I think. But then—Hiyo's an early riser…"

The starkest change he'd experienced since spending this much time around a child had been in his lifestyle rhythm. Hiyori was an 'early to bed, early to rise' sort, and even on Sundays, she was up by 6. She generally was considerate and let them sleep in, but she couldn't be left alone without even any breakfast. Once Yokozawa had started making a point to wake up early with her, being an early riser even on the weekends had become part of his daily routine.

"Shall we make it an early evening as well, then? Hiyo'll pitch a fit if we oversleep."

"You *really* don't drag your ass out of bed on your days off, do you?" Despite the fact that weekdays saw him rising even earlier than Hiyori, on his days off, Kirishima could sleep through even the vacuum cleaner being turned on in his own room. On days when they had plans, Hiyori would typically have to pull off his comforter and yell into his ear to wake him up.

"My switch just won't flip on when I know it's a weekend, that's all—though, I'm sure I could find it in me to wake up if you were to give me a kiss…?"

"*Sure* you could." He cut Kirishima a cold glare and downed his beer. Kirishima liked to gauge his reactions to comments like this—and while Yokozawa had initially

overreacted to the idle banter, he'd finally recently learned to just let it slide over him.

"Hey, yeah—why don't we sleep together now and then?"

"Wha—who the hell would do that?" Kirishima had whispered the suggestion just into his ear, and Yokozawa nearly spit up his beer. Fighting down a choking cough, he settled the can safely on the table and raised his voice, red-faced, at Kirishima, who only laughed at the display.

"I'm honored you're this worked up over the very idea."

"I'm—not *worked up*!"

"Oh no?"

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing~" Kirishima stood, a mysterious little smile on his lips, then reached forward and ruffled Yokozawa's hair.

"Hey—*cut that out*! I'm not a kid—I *said* stop that!"

"Sorry sorry—reflex!"

Yokozawa watched as Kirishima returned to the kitchen with his can in hand, combing his fingers through his hair in an effort to reset the mussed locks. "…Reflex, my *ass*." Despite his age, the guy could really act like a child sometimes—no different from the boys wanting to catch Hiyori's attention by purposefully teasing her.

Kirishima had been on-target—his refuting the accusation had been little more than show, but he was hardly objective enough to own up to the fact that these kinds of things grated on him 24-7. It would've been nice if he could bring himself to be as honest as Hiyori, but it was next to impossible given his long-cultivated contrary personality.

"……."

He finished off the rest of his beer, then stood to toss out the empty can—and found Kirishima bent over inspecting the contents of the refrigerator. “What’re you looking for? You don’t plan on drinking *more*, do you?”

“Just checking expiration dates. We should probably stop by the grocery store on the way back tomorrow.”

“Don’t buy too much; you wind up loading your cart with too much crap when you go shopping.” He liked to buy in bulk just because something was cheap, or snap items up without considering it well. In that respect at least, Hiyori was much more level-headed.

“Not like I can help it—I don’t do any cooking, so I dunno my limits.”

“I’m surprised you managed to make it this far.”

“Well it was mostly thanks to my mom and Hiyo—Hiyo’s a lot like her mother, really reliable, so that helped.”

“…Ah, I see.”

*Her mother*.

The very word sent a chill shuddering through his chest. Maybe what Yokozawa was feeling wasn’t simple worry or apprehension…but *guilt*. A guilty conscience brought about by sitting in places a wife ought to sit, having a smile turned to him that ought to be turned to a wife.

Sure, it wasn’t like he’d *stolen* Kirishima and Hiyori from his wife; still—it was clear that the place he was standing right now…was not the place he was meant to be.

“Well, whatever; I’m sure things’ll work out if I just leave the shopping to Hiyo…Yokozawa?”

“Huh—what?”

“…I should be asking you that. What’s with you today? You’ve been spacing out a lot—you’re not coming down with something, are you?”

“I’m fine—I was just out making my rounds today. I’m probably just tired.” Brushing off the worry with a pithy response, he crushed the can still in his hand and tossed it into the recycling bin.

He understood well that these feelings weren’t ones you ought to keep to yourself, but he didn’t have the courage to confess the concerns curdling in his chest just now.

“Well—don’t push yourself. It’s admirable, being gung-ho and all, but if you exhaust yourself it’ll be for nothing.”

“Yeah yeah, I know.”

“How about we pick up some nice meat tomorrow? Gotta build up your strength so you don’t keel over in this heat.”

“Meat, huh… I haven’t really been in the mood for meat lately though…” Perhaps it was because of the heatwave, but he hadn’t had much of an appetite *period*. He’d never experienced any change in his appetite because of the seasons before, so maybe he really was getting older.

“What’s a young guy doing spouting shit that makes him sound like an old man? You’re too young to get hit with metabolic syndrome just yet!”

“Oi, what’re you—!” Kirishima slipped his arms around Yokozawa from behind and tucked his fingers under the hem of his shirt to lift it up.

“Juuuust checking to see if you’ve got a little paunch or anything yet.”

“Well, you’ve *checked*.” Kirishima looked down from where he had his chin resting on Yokozawa’s shoulder as Yokozawa batted away the hand Kirishima had creeping down under his hem and readjusted his shirt, stuffing the hem firmly into the waist of his pants so Kirishima couldn’t get a grip again. “And stop hanging all over me when it’s *sweltering*.”

“C’mon, don’t blush~”

“I’m *not*. I told you: it’s *hot*.”

“Mmm, that reminds me, it’s been quite a while, huh… How about I make you even hotter?”

“What the hell are you thinking of doing? You *just* suggested we ‘make an early night of it’!” He still wasn’t used to being touched by Kirishima; it wasn’t that he disliked it, but any pleasure was overshadowed by the shame and awkwardness it brought with it. Plus—*Hiyo* lived here; he could hardly be expected to get it up under such conditions.

Kirishima gave little thought to Yokozawa’s hesitation, though, and began to loosen Yokozawa’s belt, slipping a hand below the waist. “It’s fine…just a little?”

“*Hng!*” He couldn’t help the stupid sound that leapt from his lips when Kirishima suddenly wrapped his fingers firmly around his cock. If he didn’t keep his voice down at this hour, Hiyori was sure to wake up. “You—*idiot*, cut it out!” he hissed in warning to Kirishima, who seemed to be quite enjoying himself, but the guy seemed to have no ear for listening. With his hips locked in a tight hold, Yokozawa had no way to escape easily.

“I’ll take care of you quickly, don’t worry; besides, you’re about to get in the bath, right? So who cares how sweaty you get…”

“That’s—not the *point*—!”

He grabbed Kirishima’s arms and tried to pry them loose, then froze up at the casually offered threat: “Keep squawking and you’ll wake up Hiyo.”

“That’s…*low*…”

“Sticks and stones.” The amused tone to his voice was clearly because he knew Yokozawa couldn’t fight him, breath ghosting over Yokozawa’s neck with each and every word he spoke.

“…*Hng*…!”

The fingers wrapped around him began to move lewdly, and Yokozawa grit his teeth, fighting back the breaths and sighs that tried to spill from his lips. The body heat resonating through him from behind and the scent of the shampoo wafting into his nose only served to further arouse Yokozawa’s elevating temperature.

Kirishima drew out long, gentle strokes, fingers kneading the crown in circles. The slick slide of fingers over flesh revealed how wet he was now, and while he hated to own up to it, he had to admit: Kirishima’s fingers were *amazing*.

“See? You’re getting hard…” Kirishima whispered, pressing a kiss just behind his ear.

“Don’t…need your…fucking commentary…” But the truth of the situation being so clearly presented set his mind to boiling over. Any time he found himself in Kirishima’s embrace, he felt like he’d suddenly reverted to being a pubescent teenager. Everything he’d experienced in all his years seemed meaningless, leaving him with little else to do but give himself over to being trifled with. He couldn’t help but think of the moments when he fought back with his naturally unbending nature as being simply another way that Kirishima played him. “Why…do *I* always…have to be the one…”

“Not like I can help it; if I didn’t make the first move we’d *never* do stuff like this. Leave you alone and you’ll sit there blabbing about nothing but work or Hiyo or Sorata. Try considering the *mood* a little now and then.”

“That’s—” But he clammed right up at the *way* too on-the-nose comment. He’d never been good at setting the mood—or having it set for him, either. The unease and awkwardness always reared its head first, and he wound up not being able to go through with it.

“So…why not just leave it up to me, then?”

“Don’t…spout shit I can’t under—*ah!*”

Kirishima fed more force into the fingers stroking Yokozawa, leaving Yokozawa to slouch forward instinctively, and he reflexively dug his nails into Kirishima’s arms wrapped around him to steady himself in the position.

“If I recall correctly…this is one of your good spots, right?” Kirishima slid a finger roughly along the underside from root to tip, sending a jolt through Yokozawa’s abdomen, and he bit back the moan that nearly spilled out.

He turned a glare at Kirishima, grinding out in response to his brazen comment, “*Haa…ah!* H—ow…the fuck is this…setting a *mood*…”

“I was just making sure is all… But well, I can see the answer’s rather obvious.”

Kirishima leaned in and softly nibbled at his earlobe, making his shoulders give a short jerk. “…!” A tongue laved along the outside of his ear before dipping inside briefly, and the slippery sounds just next to his eardrum sent shivers down his spine.

"…Don't you *ever* let that guy lay a finger on you again."

"!!"

The words were delivered in a voice much deeper than Kirishima had been using before, and Yokozawa instinctively dropped his gaze down to the back of his hand. It seemed that Kirishima had been concerned with the scratches beneath the bandage Hiyori had applied even more than Yokozawa had been. Faced with such an unexpected display of possessiveness, Yokozawa's temperature shot up and his senses sharpened, leaving him suddenly pushed to the point of no return.

"Let…me go…!"

"You sure about that? If I stop, you're the one who'll regret it."

Kirishima kneaded the crown with his fingertips, and a moan worked its way free from Yokozawa's throat. "—*Ah! Hng…ah…!*" Pushed to the breaking point, Yokozawa could no longer keep his voice down.

"Stop being so stubborn—just sit back and *enjoy*."

"Shut…*up*…" Being lectured as if he were a child riled him up like nothing else—but while Kirishima's calm and composed manner pissed him off, he was already too far gone to turn back now. He'd *tried* to grit his teeth and bear it, but the rising tide of pleasure was stripping him of his reason, leaving him to drown helplessly in the peaking sensation.

"You don't have to fight it—come on, *come*."

"*Hng*…a—*ah*!" He crested over at Kirishima's prompting, dirtying his pants and the hand gripping his cock and leaving his head, which had been burning feverishly, once again cool.

Kirishima dropped a soft peck to his cheek, offering praise meant to irritate Yokozawa who'd only just come back to his senses. "There's a good boy."

Yokozawa snapped at the comment that left him feeling like little more than a child being rewarded, raising his voice with, "*You*…" He couldn't help the way this arrogant side of Kirishima pissed him off. Maybe it was simply confidence that came with age, but having it shoved in his face like this got on his last nerve.

He wanted to tell the guy off a bit more, but as he slowly recovered his composure, he grew ashamed of being made to look like he was the only one getting worked up over this, and his face slowly started to heat up again.

Kirishima turned an unruffled expression in Yokozawa's direction as he rinsed his hand off in the sink. "Bet you feel refreshed now, though, right? I'd like to ask you to return the favor—but we can save it for next time."

"Who the hell said anything about *returning a favor*?"

"Shh! Keep your voice down."

"…!" Kirishima held up a finger and made a gesture to signal turning the volume down, and Yokozawa immediately remembered where they were; if Hiyo woke up, they'd have to fumble some excuse. Yokozawa bit his tongue, intent on not digging

his grave any deeper than it already was. He hated running away with his tail between his legs, but it seemed the wisest course of action at the moment. "…I'm taking a bath."

"Have fun~"

"Just—enough of your lip!" Kirishima just laughed merrily at Yokozawa's comeback, and Yokozawa grudgingly admitted to himself that that personality of Kirishima's was probably the reason he could never bring himself to genuinely hate the guy, despite the irritation bubbling up to a boil inside.

But the sticky, slick sensation was raw and unbearable, and Yokozawa took off for the bathroom at a jog in an effort to dispel the unpleasantness.

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The weather had been bright sunny skies without a cloud in sight since that morning, and the sun shone down mercilessly, as if attempting to burn to a crisp all in its path and sending the temperature skyrocketing.

The reason Yokozawa was decked out in a tie despite it being his day off was because he had work today: an autograph event was being held in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka to celebrate the reprint of a title running in *Monthly Japun.* While the plan had originally been to only hold the event in Tokyo, the schedule turned brutal in an attempt to hit up all three cities in only two days after the author expressed a desire to meet as many fans as possible and the shops put forth their eager requests in the same vein.

It was always a blessing when the authors offered their support of their own volition; having such back-up from the creator translated to real eagerness to get the job done on the part of the sales team.

"But *geez* it's hot…"

It seemed a lot of school kids had already started their summer vacations, and the streets were full of youngsters decked out in light summer wear. Biting back feelings of jealousy at the sight of so many enjoying their youth, Yokozawa turned his feet to the location of the first autograph event: *Books Marimo*.

Entering the familiar storefront, he found his subordinate Henmi had already arrived and was helping prepare for the autograph event, which was to be held in a

space near the stairs on the first floor of the building. A table had already been set up, and the area was decorated with congratulatory bouquets from the editing team and friendly authors.

Giving his greetings to the employees he knew as he passed, Yokozawa drew up close to Henmi, who was busy with the preparations. “You’re here early, Henmi.”

“Ah, good morning, Yokozawa-san!”

“Morning; I see you weren’t late today.”

Henmi’s expression turned sour at the tone of admiration in his voice. “What do you mean ‘today’? That’s mean, Yokozawa-san! I’ve only ever been late *once*, and that was back when I first joined the company! How long are you going to keep bringing that up?”

“Oh, is that when it was?”

“*Yes* that’s when it was!”

He couldn’t help teasing Henmi like this when the guy got riled up so easily—and he briefly considered that perhaps this was how Kirishima felt when he teased Yokozawa, a thought that left him feeling strange.

“Well, enough about you—when did Takanashi-sensei say she was arriving? Katou was supposed to go pick her up from the hotel, right?”

“Takanashi-sensei’s actually already here—seems she was too nervous and couldn’t stay put. I’ve already briefed her on the schedule, so I had her go on up to the waiting room upstairs.”

“I’ll go and give her my regards, then.”

Today’s autograph event was to be attended by Katou, the author’s managing editor, and Hitomi from the editing department, and Yokozawa and Henmi from the sales department, with the book store providing a few staff as attendants as well.

Customers with numbered tickets were to be lined up 30 minutes before the event was to start, but perhaps because they just couldn’t wait, a number of fans were already milling about the store, as if they started lining up too early, they’d get in the way of other paying customers.

After a brief chat with the employees on the floor in this vein, Yokozawa headed up to the waiting room. He turned down an offer of guidance, as he'd been here a dozen times before, and piled into the elevator with Henmi.

"I assume you remembered the postcards we're giving out as presents, yes?"

"Of course! They came out looking quite nice despite the fact that we had them drafted at the last minute!"

The author had drawn up an illustration in the spare moments of her busy schedule with a personal message to the fans, and that drawing had been turned into a postcard that would be distributed as a present to the fans here today.

As they drew up to the door to the waiting room, Yokozawa pulled on his jacket and knocked sharply. At the *Come in!* that followed, he stepped inside. "Sorry for the disturbance."

"Ah, good morning, Yokozawa-san."

Waiting inside, he found the store manager Okada, the star of the show Takanashi, and her managing editor Katou plus Hitomi along to provide support.

Perhaps because it was her first autograph event, Takanashi seemed rather on edge. He'd heard that, contrary to her rather dynamic writing style, the woman herself was quite low-key and shy, and when he'd brought the suggestion for this event to Katou, he'd admitted, "I dunno if she'll agree or not…" It seemed she'd wavered quite a bit over whether or not to go through with it, but eventually decided that if she was going to do it, then she wanted to meet as many readers as she could.

Yokozawa made his way over to her, reminding himself to be as unintimidating as possible, pasting on his salesman smile as he spoke. "Are you Takanashi-sensei? My apologies for the wait. I'm Yokozawa, of the sales department. Thank you so much for attending in this sweltering weather. We're extremely grateful you've fit us into your busy schedule."

Takanashi stood quickly, sending her chair screeching back across the floor and bowing her head deeply. "Th—thank you very much from my side as well! I'm sorry to trouble you all in this manner." Her tiny hands were trembling as she took Yokozawa's business card.

Katou stood beside her, speaking up in an effort to calm her down when he caught the worried expression on her pale face. “Come now, there’s no need to be so nervous! Quite the contrary—the fans coming here today will be a lot more nervous than you, so just pull yourself together!”

“Y—you think…?”

Hitomi offered his own input to bolster Katou’s comment. “Do you really think any of your fans are scary people? They’re fans of *your* work, so they all must be wonderful people!”

“You certainly have a lot of eager fans! The tickets for today’s event sold out in a flash, and even as we speak some of them are downstairs milling about the store because they couldn’t wait!”

Henmi’s report seemed to do more harm than good, and Takanashi’s expression clouded over even further. “Th—they are?! Oh man, what do I do…now I’m even *more* nervous…”

Henmi’s simple-minded character typically helped the situation as a mood-maker, but today it seemed to have backfired.

“What do you think you’re doing worrying her even more than she was, Henmi?”

“I-I-I-I-I’m sorry! I honestly didn’t mean to…!”

“Oh, no no! It’s my fault for getting nervous!”

Takanashi seemed even more flustered at Henmi’s efforts to apologize, and Katou shakily attempted to calm her down. “Let’s just—take a seat and calm down. There’s still some time before the event starts, after all.”

Just as everything was flying out of control, a knock came from the door. “Sorry for the interruption, but I’ve brought some drinks for everyone!”

The dashing figure that stepped through the door was none other than the figurehead employee of *Books Marimo*, Yukina Kou, and the room fell silent the moment he appeared.

"…Ah, did I have bad timing?" Yukina cautiously regarded the quiet onlookers, and the almost comical delivery immediately eased the tension in the room, the stiff expression on Henmi's face waxing into one of relief.

"No, actually you had great timing!" With thanks given, everyone else took their seats again.

"Well, I don't really get what I did, but I'm glad to have helped!"

Yukina was as sparkly as ever, glittering enough to match the sun blazing outside. Rather than an 'idol' air, he seemed blessed with the form of a 'prince,' and was working part-time here while devoting the rest of his time to his work as an art student. He not only boasted a number of 'fans' among the female customers with his unparalleled looks and easy manner of interaction, there was no one else in the shop who could compete with him when it came to knowledge of shoujo manga. While he'd supposedly gained most of his knowledge after starting to work part time at the book store, it seemed he'd always been a casual fan of shoujo manga.

Using his innate skills, he drafted expert-level displays for the storefront, and the POP displays as well were composed of his enthusiastic thoughts and recommendations—it wouldn't be a stretch to say there were many titles that were selling as well as they were solely due to Yukina's recommendations.

He'd earned the trust of the sales reps from a number of publishing houses, and it seemed many of them sought his advice on promoting sales.

Perhaps he was going to help out with the autograph event today; things would certainly go smoother with a trusted individual like him on hand.

"So—where shall I set these?"

"Thanks, Yukina-kun. Could you put them all on the table here?" At Okada's suggestion, Yukina began to remove a number of PET bottles from the plastic bag he'd carried, lining them up neatly.

"Will you have something, Takanashi-sensei? For cold drinks we have some tea or mineral water, or if you'd prefer something warm, we have coffee and red tea as well." Yukina threw a soft smile in the still-nervous Takanashi's direction, and as expected, she gaped wide-eyed as she took in Yukina's appearance.

Yokozawa could hardly begrudge her shock; the first time he'd ever met Yukina, he couldn't fathom why someone with his looks was working part-time in a book store of all places.

"Ah, umm, th-then, could I have some tea, please?"

"Is green tea all right? Here you are." He neatly wiped the bottle free of condensation and passed it over to her, and Takanashi's expression eased a hair as she thanked him.

Katou, seated next to her, promptly raised his hand. "Ah, could I get some water too, then? It was sweltering outside and I'm parched!"

"By all means, help yourself."

"…Yukina-kun's so *rude* to me." Peals of laughter erupted as Katou slumped in place, dejected. Yokozawa cast a glance over at Takanashi, finding her hiding her giggles behind a hand to her mouth; her nerves seemed to have completely dissipated, relieving Yokozawa.

"Oh yeah—so is Kirishima-san not here yet?"

"!!"

Just as he'd been about to settle into an empty seat, he jolted to attention at the unexpected name from the store manager's mouth. His expression nearly twitched involuntarily, but he made as if to rearrange his chair and casually inquired of Henmi, "Kirishima-san…is coming today?"

"From what I hear, yes. Were you not aware?"

"I—I suppose not."

Most of the meetings to discuss the upcoming event had involved only Katou; he'd completely forgotten that Kirishima would be attending as well. He was the editor-in-chief, so there was no way he wouldn't at least show his face at an event within the city limits.

Yokozawa knew he simply needed to keep a calm, unruffled expression on his face, but running into Kirishima outside of their private lives always left him with a

strange nervousness. Reminding himself that displaying agitation only increased suspicion, he somehow managed to maintain a poker face.

Katou took out his cell phone and scrolled down the screen, checking for incoming messages. “He texted me earlier saying that the roads were crowded and he was running a bit late. I’m sure he’ll be here before the event gets started, but I haven’t received any updates.” Just then, a knock came from the door.

Yokozawa braced himself for Kirishima’s possible arrival, but the person who entered turned out to be a store employee.

“…Ah!”

He *thought* he recognized her—it was the young woman he’d saved on the train the other day. If he recalled correctly, she’d said her name had been *Matsumoto*. She’d mentioned mainly working the register, but today she’d left her station and was perhaps going to be helping out with the autograph event.

“I’ve brought some coffee!”

“Eh? But—Yukina-kun already brought everyone drinks…?”

At the manager’s words, Matsumoto colored in shame. “EH?! He did?! I—I’m so sorry! This was totally unnecessary huh…” She’d perhaps meant it as a thoughtful gesture, but her timing had been off, it seemed.

Taking pity on Matsumoto as she stood there, shoulders slumped, Henmi raised a hand. “Well, since you’re here—could I get some coffee? I was just thinking I’d like some! Yokozawa-san, you’ll have some too, won’t you?”

“Oh—sure.” It was hot outside, and he truthfully would’ve rather had a cool drink, but taking into account the atmosphere of the room, he nodded his assent.

“Then how about you pour some for everyone?”

“Of course!” As she passed around cups to everyone, she drew to a stop before Yokozawa. “Umm, thank you so much for the other day, Yokozawa-san…!”

He grew flustered, not having expected her to bring up the events from before in front of everyone else. “Oh—no, I just really only did what anyone would’ve done. You don’t need to worry about it.”

But neither Henmi nor Katou were the type to just let something like this slide. “What do you mean ‘the other day’?” As expected, Henmi cut right to the quick of the matter.

He could feel their gazes on him, bubbling over with interest, but he glanced away and let brushed off the question. “None of your business.”

And then Matsumoto spoke on his behalf, her words slightly muffled. “Oh, the other day, Yokozawa-san saved from a pervert on the train.”

Yokozawa massaged his temples—fucking perfect. She probably thought she’d been helping him as he seemingly struggled for an answer, but it only wound up fanning the flames of curiosity even further.

“Wow, really? As expected of Yokozawa-san! What a cool guy~!”

“It was nothing, really. I even let the culprit escape.”

Hitomi nodded his agreement. “Still, that sounds amazing! You definitely don’t want to let guys like that get away with it, but you so rarely actually notice what they’re doing.”

He’d been certain they’d all turn the display into fodder for banter, and at the expected response, Yokozawa’s expression soured. “All right, that’s enough of this discussion.”

“Aww, c’mon! Let’s talk about it a little—” But Henmi’s objection was cut off by another knock on the door—and just as Yokozawa rejoiced that he’d been saved, he shuddered at the words of the employee who’d poked his head inside.

“Apologies for the intrusion—but Kirishima-san has arrived.”

“Sorry I’m late.”

A more than familiar figure swept into the room on the heels of the employee who’d shown him the way. Unable to stand the awkward atmosphere, Yokozawa slid his chair backward and made a futile attempt to hide behind Henmi. He was sure that if Kirishima turned his gaze to Yokozawa straight on, he’d wind up doing something stupid.

“Good morning, Kirishima-san. We’ve been waiting for you!”

“Sorry for that, Katou. So this is Takanashi-sensei, huh? It’s a pleasure to meet you, I’m *Japun*‘s editor-in-chief, Kirishima.”

It seemed this was their first meeting, and Kirishima rattled off an easy self-introduction. Glancing to check whether or not Takanashi had been rattled anew, faced with the editor-in-chief, Yokozawa noticed her cheeks flush red as she stared openly at Kirishima.

It was easy to forget, given that most of *Japun*‘s authors were male, but just as with the editors of *Emerald*, Kirishima’s popularity with female authors was rather famous. It was said that a number of female authors attended the once-a-year party thrown by Marukawa just for a chance to see them.

Takanashi was likely taken with Kirishima’s looks, which lived up to the rumors. The female editors often gossiped that he could make a living in the fashion or gravure model industry, but today he seemed to have taken particular care with how he presented himself.

“It—it’s a pleasure to meet you! I’m Takanashi… Thank you for always looking after me!”

“Thank you for your efforts today. My sincerest apologies for my late arrival.”

“Oh, not at all! I heard you were stuck in traffic—was everything all right?”

“Indeed; I was panicking a bit there for a second, but I’m glad I managed to make it in time.” His gentle smile would’ve seemed absolutely perfect to anyone looking on—it was clear he comported himself with full knowledge of how his onlookers viewed him. His coworkers had probably never so much as given thought to the fact that he gave great loud belly laughs, mouth wide open, at home.

It irritated Yokozawa to no end how Kirishima feigned congeniality here. Sure, as a working adult, it was hardly a rare thing to smile amicably with your clients and coworkers, and if Yokozawa let himself get worked up over every little thing, there’d be no end to it—and yet, despite knowing this, his heart still wavered in such moments as now.

“And actually, I’ve brought someone with me—would you mind if I introduced them?”

It seemed he'd arrived with someone else—perhaps he'd brought along a part-timer to observe?

"By all means—another member of the editing team?"

"C'mon; get in here." He ignored Takanashi's question and called out to whoever was waiting outside, but they seemed hesitant to enter.

"…?"

Kirishima seemed to be caught up in a discussion with the person, but Yokozawa couldn't quite catch the other's voice from where he stood—and after being all but told to *snap it up!*, they finally appeared.

"Pl…please excuse the intrusion…"

"?!"

He'd thought it strange that Kirishima seemed to have his gaze settled rather low—until the nervously bashful face that showed itself from the other side of the door turned out to be that of Hiyori.

He never would've thought he'd see a face like hers here of all places, and as he stood there, shocked speechless, Kirishima began to introduce Hiyori to everyone. "This is my daughter Hiyori; go on, greet everyone."

"It's—it's nice to meet you. I'm Kirishima Hiyori. Thank you for always taking care of my papa… Umm, I brought some treats for everyone, so please enjoy them!"

The treats she held out had probably been picked up by Kirishima. She seemed rather nervous standing there under the gazes of the whole room, fidgeting bashfully as she bowed her head, and at the sight of this, all of the adults in the room were immediately put at ease.

"How adorable!"

"I never knew you had a daughter this old, Kirishima-san!" The adults all began extolling their praises at once, tossing out questions left and right, and Kirishima didn't seem to mind this one bit.

"Wait—I didn't even know you were married! How old are you now, Hiyori-chan?"

Yokozawa wanted to warn Hiyori not to get too close to Yukina when he turned a smile her way, but he couldn't afford to make a scene here, and instead pushed his chair back a bit further to keep her from spotting him.

"I'm ten years old." It was adorable the way she ducked her head bashfully when responding, but Yokozawa was beside himself with panic.

"Just entered 5th grade this year. She's cute, unlike me, right? I didn't wanna leave her downstairs by herself, so I dragged her along with me. Actually—she's a huge fan of yours, Takanashi-sensei. She's bought all your comics and even got a numbered ticket for today's event all by herself in secret. She was planning to come here today without telling me even!"

"Wai—*Papa!* Don't tell them *that*!" Hiyori flushed brightly, ire rising at Kirishima blabbing her secrets in front of an author she respected, but the other adults in the room evidently thought it adorable.

"C'mon, it's nothing to be ashamed of. You used your own allowance to buy the comics, didn't you? Saying you wanted to support the series on your own."

"*Papa!*"

"Yeah yeah, I'll shut up now. But—since you're here, tell her yourself."

"M—myself?! What do I do…what should I say?" Kirishima gave her a little push with a *Go on*, placing Hiyori in front of Takanashi, obviously unsure of herself. Her hand trembled where she gripped the sleeve of Kirishima's shirt, seemingly nervous, and her eyes as she glanced up were clouded over with a thin sheen of tears.

"Just say the same thing you're always thinking—whatever you're always saying to me."

"Hiyori-chan—you buy my books yourself?"

"I do! I always really look forward to them! Umm, well, I'm cheering you on, s-so please do your best…!" Her words tumbled out in a rush, cheeks stained red, but she still managed to get her thoughts out.

Takanashi seemed moved, hearing such words directly from the mouth of a real fan, and her eyes were shining just as Hiyori's were. "Thank you so much, Hiyori-chan."

While not many could make it all the way to an autograph event, fans Hiyori's age weren't all that rare. Takanashi's works appealed to a wide range of audience ages, with a good half of them being female fans, and while they hadn't taken a precise count, it seemed that most of the fans here today were women, according to those in charge of taking attendance.

Comics were a form of entertainment that youngsters could enjoy with their own earnings. Yokozawa himself had gone out to buy manga magazines, his allowance gripped tight in one hand, when he was young.

He recalled distantly that Kirishima had once mentioned that he put his whole self into creating works that children could lose themselves in—perhaps having such an enthusiastic reader closer to himself than anyone else had been one such reason he felt that way.

"Well you can't stand around here being nervous with such an adorable fan cheering you on with her whole heart! You're about to meet a lot more fans shortly, after all!"

Takanashi nodded sharply at Katou's words. "Indeed. I'll do my best today and tomorrow!" From the look on her face, the anxiety and nerves from earlier had completely dissipated.

"You'll do your best—only for the autograph event?"

"Oh, of course I'll work hard with my manuscript as well!"

The atmosphere in the room lightened with the laughter that followed, and when Yokozawa let himself get drawn into chuckles as well, Kirishima spoke up, addressing him, "By the way, Yokozawa—just what on earth are you *doing*? There's no way in hell your huge self can hide that easily."

"…!" He'd somehow convinced himself that he wouldn't be noticed, but Kirishima had nonetheless spotted him, it seemed. Reluctantly correcting his posture, he kept his eyes averted and gave his greetings. "…Good morning."

"Eh? Oniichan?" Apparently Hiyori hadn't noticed him. She must not have noticed anyone else in the thrall of meeting her beloved Takanashi. Her eyes went wide as she stared at Yokozawa.

"*'Oniichan'*?!"

"……."

Henmi grew agitated at the single word from Hiyori's mouth, and without even looking, Yokozawa could tell clearly that everyone was looking at him. He thrust an angry glare at Kirishima in an attempt to communicate that he'd tried not to stand out precisely *because* he had known this would happen, but the expression he received in return was one of self-satisfaction.

"So you're close with Hiyori-chan then, Yokozawa-san! I see—you've been spending a lot of time at Kirishima-san's place lately, haven't you?"

At Henmi's comment, Katou cut in, "Oh yeah, now that you mention it, that reminds me of Kirishima-san showing me a picture of Yokozawa-san cooking someth—"

"One more word out of you and I can't be held responsible for what happens—got it, Katou?"

At the sharp glare that dared him to say anything more unnecessary, Katou got the hint and immediately grew quiet. "Oh uh, I don't…really remember the particulars actually…"

It wasn't as if he'd done anything embarrassing, but it certainly hadn't been like him, and he therefore didn't want to be a topic of conversation to people who had no business discussing it.

"C'mon, there's nothing to hide, Yokozawa; everyone here knows perfectly well that you come over to my place and eat dinner all the time. You're close friends with Hiyo here too, right?"

At Kirishima's prompting, Hiyori nodded strongly. "Right!" While Yokozawa typically would've found the display endearing, just now he was desperate to keep them from spilling anything carelessly.

"Hmm, but still…Yokozawa-san's an, 'Oniichan' huh…"

"You gotta problem with that?"

"No, not really, I just—*wow*!" Yokozawa hadn't wanted to put on a scowl in front of Hiyori, so instead he kicked the leg of Henmi, who'd spoken suggestively, under the table. Kirishima simply looked on at the display in amusement for a moment before finally swooping in to save him.

“Hiyo—isn’t it about time for you to be heading downstairs?”

Hiyori grew frantic when he showed her his watch. “Ah, you’re right!” Without her noticing it, the time had rolled around to start lining up as printed on the numbered tickets.

“Still got that ticket you received earlier?”

“Yup, I put it in my wallet! I’m gonna head down then, Papa!”

“Can you make it down on your own? You want me to go with you down to the first floor?”

“I’m *fine*! Geez, you’re such a worrywart, Papa!”

Matsumoto watched the father-daughter argument, extending her hand. “Ah, I’m headed downstairs as well, Hiyori-chan—shall we go together?”

“Would you mind? I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Not at all; I need to get going myself. Well then, I’ll take Hiyori-chan and be off! C’mon, Hiyori-chan, let’s get going.”

At Matsumoto’s prompting, Hiyori nodded eagerly. “‘Kay! Umm, sorry to have disturbed you in this busy time!”

“I’ll see you later, Hiyori-chan.” At Takanashi’s parting words, Hiyori left to room with a beaming expression. Her steps seemed unsteady as she toddled out, likely because she was so excited, but with Matsumoto with her, there was probably nothing to be worried about.

“Hiyori-chan certainly seemed thrilled to meet Sensei.”

Yokozawa responded idly to Henmi’s comment, “Sure did. That was the first time I’ve ever seen her so nervous, but I guess that just shows you how much she looks up to her.” He’d been shocked when Hiyori had shown up, but her innocence had helped calm the whole room. Maybe that had been Kirishima’s intention from the get-go, bringing her here.

“I apologize for the disruption, Sensei. Thank you so much for humoring my daughter.”

Takanashi shook her head as Kirishima bowed his thanks again. “Not at all! Thanks to her, my nerves are completely gone now. I feel like I can get through this event calmly now. I’ll have to thank her properly later…”

“Please just relate those feelings of gratitude to the fans who you’ll meet today and tomorrow. They’re all coming here with the same thoughts and emotions as her, after all.”

At Kirishima’s words, Takanashi’s expression changed to one of realization, and she nodded firmly. “I shall, then. I’ll do my absolute best today!” Hiyori’s words from before seemed to have been delivered on behalf of all fans; she hadn’t done anything particularly special herself—and that was exactly what Kirishima had wanted to relate to Takanashi.

Increased sales invariably indicated increased numbers of readers, but it was difficult to really understand the situation via numbers alone. Granted, even the number of people she would meet today and tomorrow was limited, representing only a small percentage of her whole fan faction, but just by exchanging a few words, she would be able to grasp their thoughts and feelings.

Holding an autograph event wasn’t simply about selling goods and delivering fan service; it was a way for authors to directly interact with their fans and to experience just how much these people of all ages and walks of life enjoyed the works they created.

As Yokozawa extended a hand to take up the now-chilled coffee before him, the phone to the waiting room rang, and from Okada’s conversation after he picked up the receiver, it was clear the call was from the staff on the first floor who’d been busy with preparations.

“Well, could we ask you to get ready now? It’s a bit early, but it seems most of the customers are already here.” At his words, everyone stood in place, and Yokozawa’s gaze locked with Kirishima’s for just a moment as he pulled back Takanashi’s chair to escort her downstairs—but Yokozawa quickly turned his head and glanced away.

Kirishima was a hard man to ignore; anytime they found themselves in the same room, Yokozawa couldn’t help how *conscious* he was of the guy. But if Kirishima ever realized just how often Yokozawa let himself get swept away, there was no telling what he’d say.

They were both working right now, he reminded himself, and he made an effort to keep a cool, calm demeanor. The way he found himself acting like a teenager with a crush sometimes was mortifying.

“What’s wrong, Yokozawa-san?”

“*Nothing*. Just—get going!” In an effort to hide his discomfort, he slapped Henmi roughly on the back when he turned to regard Yokozawa curiously.

“*Oww*—what was that for?! Geez…”

He ignored Henmi’s cries of protest and boarded the elevator belatedly, keeping his face resolutely turned away from Kirishima, who looked on with a knowing gaze.

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The autograph event went over with great success, Takanashi’s interactions with her fans being uneventful from start to finish and leaving the time flying by in a flash. Watching the readers receive their autographs, eyes shining, it kind of left you with the urge to try even harder in your job—and thanks to that, Yokozawa found himself free of the fatigue that came with having to work on a weekend.

Given that there was another event scheduled for that evening in Nagoya, Takanashi had dashed off with Katou and Henmi, leaving Yokozawa behind to take care of the clean-up.

“Aaand…there we go.”

He arranged the cardboard boxes full of presents from readers into a single stack; given that it was far more than could be toted home by hand, they’d decided to ship the boxes to Takanashi’s home. He could bring the posters used to decorate the event home with him for now and just return them to the office the next morning.

He was sealing up the boxes with a roll of tape he’d received from the store, when a voice called out to him from behind. “Excellent work today, Yokozawa-san. I’m glad everything ended successfully; here, for you.”

Yokozawa gratefully took the proffered paper cup from Okada. “Ah, thank you. You took wonderful care of us today.” While he didn’t feel tired, his throat was dry as a bone, as he hadn’t had a moment’s rest to have a drink since the event started. He

downed the chilled carbonated beverage in one gulp, refreshingly drawing away the sweat that had coated his body.

“We could say the same to you; we’re incredibly grateful that Takanashi-sensei even autographed a copy of her book for us to display in the storefront.”

“She was thrilled herself, getting to meet everyone—after all, she rarely gets to directly interact with not only the readers but also the bookstore employees. She said it was a great encouragement, getting to see where her books are sold.”

“Then all the effort was worth it to have her say such wonderful things. Please give her our regards.”

“I will indeed.” He gave a firm nod—but shuddered at the name that popped up in the comment that immediately followed.

“That reminds me—has Kirishima-san already left? If he’s still around, I’d like to greet him once more.”

“Ah, he went off to search for his daughter a while back. He mentioned something about going on some ‘expedition’ and headed off to check around the store. I’m sure he’ll be back once he’s found her.” He delivered his thoughts, making a concerted effort not to let his agitation show on his face. Getting this flustered at the mere mention of the guy’s name? He had it *bad*. He’d never thought himself this weak to such unexpected occurrences.

“I see—then it’ll probably be a bit longer, huh. I’m going to take my leave for now, but when he gets back, could you have someone come find me?” With that, Okada dashed out of the waiting room as well. He’d been hanging around helping out with the autograph event all day, so he probably had a lot of work piling up.

“Hm…?”

His phone buzzed from his back pocket, and on checking the sender, he realized it was an e-mail from Henmi letting him know that they’d safely made it onto the bullet train. Relieved that they’d been able to board right on schedule, he responded with notice of Okada’s comments. Now all that was left was to pray that the events in Nagoya and Osaka went off without a hitch.

“Let’s see then…now I need to…” Running through a mental list to see if he hadn’t forgotten to do anything, he realized he’d forgotten to paste the address label onto

the boxes to be shipped. He glanced around the room for the slip he distinctly recalled writing the address on earlier, when Matsumoto poked her head hesitantly inside.

“Ah, umm, good work today.”

“Oh, yeah, you too. You really helped out today; thanks.” He recovered his posture to thank her, as she’d helped keep the line up and guide the fans.

“It was my first time helping out with an autograph event, but I’m glad I was able to be of assistance. So, umm…”

She seemed to have something she wanted to say still, but appeared hesitant to actually voice it, and Yokozawa patiently waited for her to continue. She opened and closed her mouth again several times before eventually steeling herself and raising her head. “Umm, do you…still have work after this?”

“Huh? Oh, no—I’m done for the day.”

“Do you…perhaps have some time, then? If it’s all right with you, I’d like to—”

But Matsumoto was cut off by Hiyori dashing into the room as she launched herself at Yokozawa, wrapping her arms tight around his waist. “Oniichan!”

“Hiyo…you done with your ‘expedition’?” She seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed exploring the bookstore. Taking after her father, she loved bookstores and libraries and was an enthusiastic reader of not only comics but also picture books and fairy tales.

“Yup! I saw eeeeverything from the very top floor down! There’s so many books here, it’s amazing! You done with work now, Oniichan?”

“Yeah, I’m finished.” He could just leave the sealed up boxes here.

“Really?? Then let’s go to the planetarium together!”

“I don’t mind—but have you asked your papa?”

“Yup! He said he’d take us! And he’s gonna take us to get some tasty cake, too!”

Truthfully, Yokozawa had very little interest in the planetarium, but he had no objection if Hiyori wanted to go.

Suddenly recalling here that Matsumoto had seemed about to say something earlier, he glanced her way, but she just waved her hands before herself with a forced smile. “My talk can wait—it’s fine! Please go to the planetarium with Hiyori-chan. If I recall correctly—they’re doing some limited time summer-only program there, aren’t they?”

At Matsumoto’s question, Hiyori nodded with a bright smile. “They are! I thought I might do my summer research project on constellations, and Papa told me about the planetarium.”

“You’re already thinking about your summer project? You only just started summer vacation.”

“Well if I don’t get it out of the way, I can’t play without worrying about it!”

“Smart girl.” He couldn’t help admiring her ethic from the bottom of his heart. Yokozawa had never been the type to leave things til the very last moment, but he had generally spent the first half of summer vacation playing to his heart’s content.

“Oh, Yokozawa—you done cleaning up?” He wasn’t sure what the guy had been doing, but Kirishima entered the room a few moments behind Hiyori.

“I’ll be done after applying this label… Where were you just now?”

“Ran into Okada just outside so we had a little chat. What—you bothered that I was talking to someone else?”

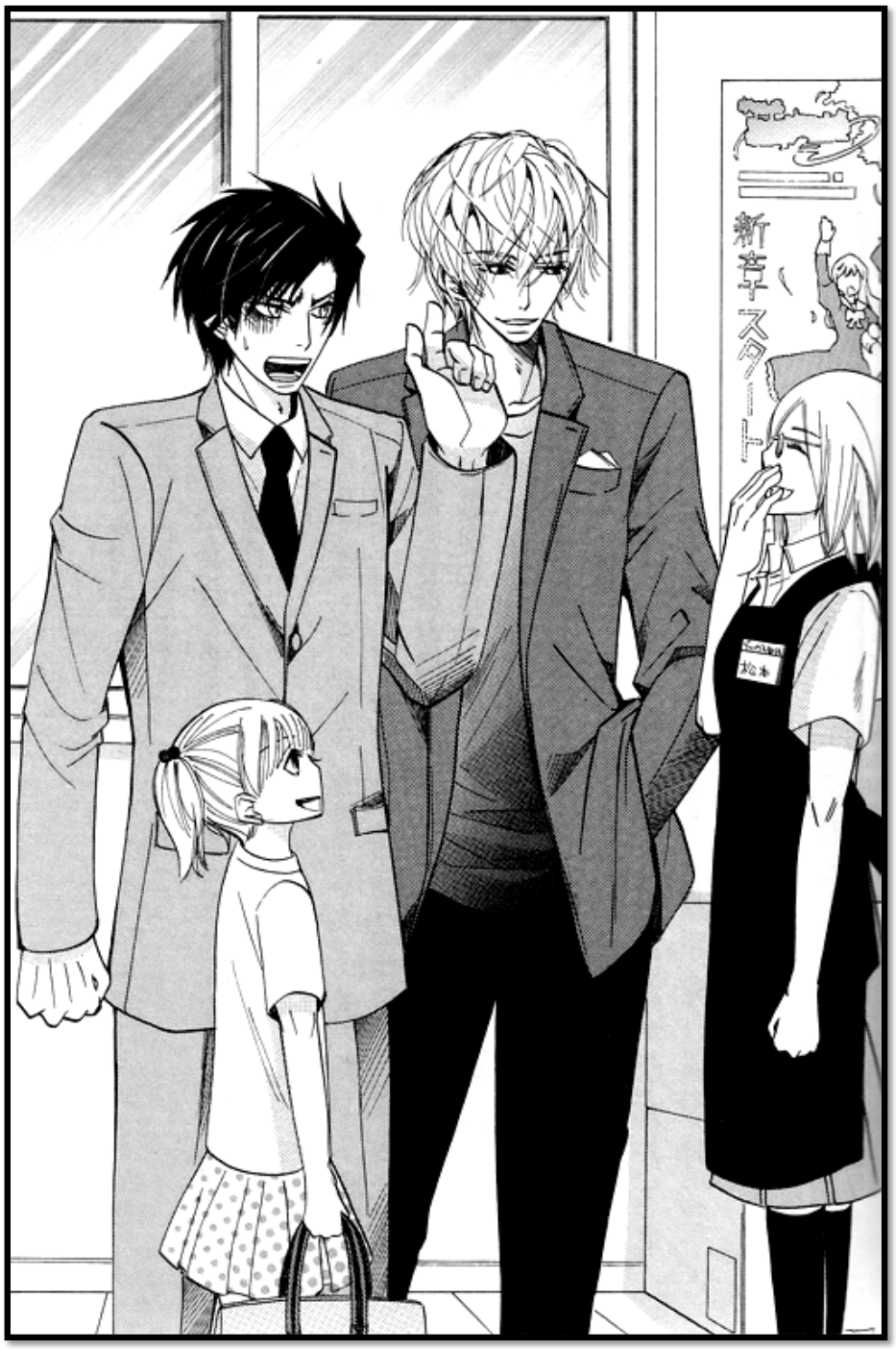
“I didn’t say a damn thing like *that*!” Kirishima’s leering teasing caused him to forget they were in public, and he reverted to the typical speaking style he used in private.

“That’s awfully suspicious, you getting so riled up. So Hiyo—will Yokozawa be joining us at the planetarium?”

“Yup!”

“Good, then—let’s get some dinner while we’re at it. You don’t mind, do you, Yokozawa?” He purposefully draped one arm over Yokozawa’s shoulder, and Yokozawa brushed the arm away with a shudder. He might have been dressing it up as a joke, but touching the guy in public was just asking for trouble.

“Hey—*cut that out*!”


新章スタート

Despite realizing fully well that Yokozawa was on edge, Kirishima continued with an air of feigned innocence, “Aww, what’re you blushing for?”

“I’m not *blushing*! I’ve still got work to do here so just—sit your ass down and wait patiently with Hiyo.”

“C’mon, play along would you?”

“You know—I’m *not* here to play games.”

Matsumoto had been watching their exchange quietly, when a repressed giggle found its way out of her mouth. At the sight of her chuckling with shoulders shaking, Yokozawa ground his teeth. “You certainly seem close!”

“We’re *really* not—” “—*Frighteningly* close.”

Kirishima interrupted Yokozawa’s unthinking attempt at an excuse with a smile, and apparently thinking the bold confession nothing more than a joke, Matsumoto let out an even greater laugh.

“……”

Kirishima seemed to be making nothing but suggestive statements today—perhaps he was just in the mood to see Yokozawa agitated at the comments—and no matter how loudly Yokozawa voiced his displeasure, it only seemed to backfire.

He was simply grateful that Matsumoto had laughed off the whole display. If she’d twigged to their relationship, he’d be too mortified to ever step foot in *Books Marimo* again.

“Something the matter?”

He gave up on voicing his complaints, instead tossing out with a sigh, “No, nothing.”

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The sky outside the car window was stained a pale violet. Today had perhaps felt quite a bit shorter than usual in large part because he’d spent most of it with Hiyori.

“You tired?”

“Not really; just was noticing that the sun had finally set.”

On leaving behind *Books Marimo*, Yokozawa and the Kirishimas had dropped by a cafe touted to serve delicious cakes before heading to the planetarium, after which they went shopping to grant Hiyori's wish for new clothes and enjoyed dinner in the restaurant district before heading home.

It was always a pleasure to see Hiyori enjoying herself, but he never would've imagined that taking a girl shopping could be this utterly exhausting. He tipped his hat to all the fathers who managed to work every weekday and still dedicate their weekends to doting on their families.

"Good job being our luggage carrier today, by the way."

"It wasn't a big deal, but hanging around inside that world of pink was just… Why the hell do women have to take so long shopping?"

"That will forever remain a mystery to me."

The back seat was stuffed with dozens of paper bags full of casual clothes, treats for Sorata from the pet shop, and Hiyo herself, fast asleep after a tiring day.

"And of course the culprit herself seems to be off in dreamland." Watching her sleep peacefully somehow made Yokozawa feel at peace as well.

"Well, she had quite an exciting day after all. Sorry to drag you around with us so much—you didn't care about going to the planetarium, did you?"

"At least I got a nice nap out of it." He'd given in to the sleepiness that had stolen upon him the moment the lights went down and had spent most of the viewing in dreams. The reclining chairs were so comfortable he'd been able to sleep remarkably well, and Hiyori had been shocked when she'd woken him up after the video had ended.

"The story setup was actually pretty interesting; wasn't dull like in the past, and had a nice soundtrack, too."

"Does Hiyo think it'll be useful for her research project?"

"Yeah; she's going off to stay with her maternal grandparents from next week, so she's gonna do some stargazing using everything she learned today."

"I see… So she's going all by herself?"

“She seems to not be worried about it; excited as anything to ride an airplane, even. I think I’m more nervous at the prospect of being left alone in that apartment without her.”

“I suppose so.” Yokozawa was no one’s father, but thanks to Hiyo, he was getting an excellent taste of what it was like to be one. Seeing her off in the mornings praying that nothing happened to her, feeling relief wash over him when she was there in the evenings to welcome him back—even once, when she’d pathetically apologized to him for the braid he’d plaited coming undone after the boy sitting next to her had pulled on it, he’d seriously considering going to teach the little punk a lesson.

“I guess kids grow up without their parents knowing it, huh…” She even sometimes said things that made the adults around her react in shock, and Yokozawa recalled that even at her age, he hadn’t been nearly as mature. “Still—she was planning on coming to the event alone—even reserved a ticket for it herself, right? It bowled me over when you brought her in.”

“Seems the reservation instructions were printed in the magazine. Told me she called them in secret and everything.” She was already in 5th grade, so she had no trouble riding the train by herself and even calling a bookstore to reserve a ticket. Still—it was nonetheless shocking that Hiyo had managed to go through with it all. “She’s *just* like you in that respect. Like—the way you put your thoughts into action, you’re full of surprises…”

“Actually—I didn’t even know about her plans until last night, myself. She was asking me details about my plans today, so I turned it back on her and she confessed the whole thing, saying it would’ve been embarrassing to run into me at the event space so she was just doing a little investigating. *Damn* but it was adorable.”

“Why would it’ve been embarrassing?” What could possibly be shameful about meeting an author you liked? Yokozawa couldn’t understand her logic at all.

“Well even though I’d told her I wasn’t the managing editor, she still knew that I was involved with it through work. Maybe she found that embarrassing? She’s about ready to hit that second rebellious age, after all.”

“I can’t see her ever being the rebellious sort, honestly.” Hiyo loved Kirishima so much her friends often teased that she was a daddy’s girl. She’d never adopt any attitude that might be construed as ‘rebellious’ and had an honest, intelligent personality.

Kirishima laughed, shoulders shaking, as Yokozawa cocked his head in confusion. “Wow, you’re a full-fledged doting parent now. — There’s no such thing as a child who doesn’t go through some rebellious period. When she was little, she turned every single thing into a fight; it was horrible.”

“Even though she’s as good a kid as she is now?”

“She can be pretty damn stubborn; she won’t budge an inch if she doesn’t want to do something. And she’s as mouthy as me—so I actually lost my fair share of verbal fights.”

“I guess when you put it that way…” He now recalled that Hiyori often scolded Kirishima for his lazy ways. He’d assumed it was just a product of her upbringing, but perhaps it was actually part of her innate personality.

“Though she’s sweet as anything when it comes to *you*.”

“That’s because I don’t *do* anything to get her on my ass.”

“I always knew you were the mothering type, but I never would’ve thought Hiyo’d take to you as well as she has. Now I’m worried one of these days she’s gonna come up to me and declare, ‘I’m gonna marry Yokozawa-oniichan!’”

Yokozawa snorted softly at the confessed worry. “And what would you do if she did?”

“I’d have to tell her she wasn’t allowed. I’m not letting her get married—and I’m not letting you, either.”

“What the hell is that?”

“That’s all I can tell her for now, isn’t it?” He was…actually kind of relieved at the response. He’d had misgivings that Kirishima might actually tell Hiyo about their relationship, but he seemed not to be interested in being that open just now.

“Well, you don’t have to worry—her father complex is dyed-in-the-wool. If Hiyo brings home any boys…I guarantee you they’ll be just like you.”

“If she brought home anyone like me, I’d kick ‘em out at the front gates. I’d never accept anyone like that.”

The sight of Kirishima so miffed was so amusing, Yokozawa couldn't help his shoulders shaking. He was usually so unruffled in everything he did, but when it came to Hiyori, he turned remarkably on-edge.

"Then just what kind of man would you accept for her? I bet you'll be hiding in a corner sobbing when she gets married."

At his teasing comment, Kirishima fired back, "Like hell; I'll be bawling my eyes out at the ceremony. And you can laugh all you like—but what about you? You look like you'd be worse off than me."

"Well sure, I might get choked up, but I'm not the type to cry in public." He was laughing this all off—but at the same time, he was kind of shocked that Kirishima had gotten it into his head as a given that they'd still be together that far in the future.

For Hiyori to be getting married…that would be at least another 10 or more years from now. From an outsider's perspective, the only thing they had in common was the fact that they worked for the same company. Attending a ceremony such as that would require they be *quite* close.

"I'm not so sure about that… You say that now—but you'll probably be wailing when the time comes."

"The hell I will," he sniped back, feeling battered on all sides by the unexpected display of Kirishima's feelings.

"Fine; then let's make a bet—on whether or not you cry at the ceremony."

"That's a pretty far-off subject. And just what are we wagering?"

"I'll think of something eventually."

"Geez, you really make some over-the-top suggestions sometimes."

There was no telling how their relationship would develop in the future. Still—Yokozawa could do his level best to work…and make this last as long as possible. He'd spent quite a bit of time lately focusing on the past, but Kirishima's words left him feeling just the tiniest bit hopeful.

"…By the way, I wanted to confirm something."

"What?"

"Was that girl with the glasses the one you helped out on the train the other day?"

"H—how did you know?!" He was shocked at the sharp observation—after all, the guy hadn't been there when Matsumoto had blabbed about the incident, and from the way he spoke, it didn't seem as if he'd heard it second-hand either.

"Anyone could tell. You're the only person thick enough not to notice the way she was mooning over you. She's got it bad for you, it's obvious."

"The hell she does," he snorted at Kirishima's disenchanted manner of speaking, but the gaze Kirishima returned was shocked.

"Wow, you really *are* oblivious. You don't think she wanted to invite you to dinner or something? She said she wanted to thank you, didn't she?"

"…Oh…" At his comment, Yokozawa suddenly remembered—when Hiyo had charged into the room, Matsumoto had been asking if he was free for something. And after he'd saved her on the train, she'd been adamant that she wanted to thank him, so perhaps she'd been trying to bring that to fruition then…

"Well, maybe it's for the best you didn't notice. You probably would've tripped over your own words if you'd realized how she felt about you."

"That's not…"

"Not true? Can you *really* say that?"

"……."

Asked so pointedly, no—he couldn't deny it. He had no way of being sure whether or not he would've been able to keep calm if she'd overtly shown interest in him as Kirishima was suggesting.

"I'm sure you'll run into her again around the store—but just make sure you don't go getting her hopes up, you sexy beast. Don't do something stupid like unwittingly wind up all alone with her."

"What's that supposed to mean—'get her hopes up'?"

"She'll start thinking maybe something could happen if you're too nice to her."

“That hardly ever happens, I’m telling you. She’s just attached to me a little, that’s all.” He could understand girls going a bit loopy over guys like Yukina, but that would never happen in a million years with someone like himself. It was obvious she was grateful to Yokozawa, but he couldn’t imagine she’d possibly fall head over heels for him.

“Well if it were me, I’d fall for you in a flash.”

His face lit up at the casually muttered comment. “…Don’t suggest she’s got the same bad taste you do.”

Kirishima sighed deeply at the self-deprecating comment Yokozawa snapped out to hide his embarrassment. “Geez, can’t you do something about your inability to properly judge your own self-worth? Haven’t you realized that more and more chicks have been inviting you out lately?”

“It’s not really any different from be—”

—*fore*, he’d been about to protest, but cut himself off. Sure, there’d been quite a few invitations through Henmi open to the entire sales department, but there had definitely been an increase lately in invitations directed at Yokozawa personally.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed it yourself, but the atmosphere around you has changed quite a bit. Lots of chicks make comments about how you’re easier to talk to now.”

“Yeah right—and even if that’s the case, what exactly do you expect me to do about it?” It was helping nothing having all of Yokozawa’s faults simply pointed out for examination, so he pressed directly in an attempt to force him to get to the point, “Just what are you trying to get at here, anyway?”

“In short—while I’m thrilled if your changing like this was my doing, I don’t like that it’s making you more popular.”

“Wh—what the hell is *that*?!” A chill rippled through him when Kirishima delivered the words with such a serious expression. He caught himself unthinkingly staring at Kirishima’s profile, but the guy didn’t seem to be teasing him this time.

“You’re the one who told me to say it.”

“Yeah, but…” Unable to offer any further retort, he pursed his lips and fell quiet. Sure, he’d *said* for him to spit it out, but he never would’ve expected *that* to come

out of his mouth. And he couldn't gripe about it either, seeing as Kirishima had neither been teasing nor berating him.

This must have been what they meant by 'digging your own grave'.

"Don't blush over something like *that* after all this time. Though I'll admit, it's part of your charm."

"Whatever just—shut up."

"Yes sir~" The corners of Kirishima's lips quirked up when Yokozawa raised his voice in irritation. The look he got on his face, like watching a child throw a temper tantrum, truly grated, but at least he settled for simply chuckling and didn't say anything further.

"…Papa…"

"!!" When silence had settled over the inside of the car, they could hear Hiyo talking in her sleep in the back seat, and the soft voice brought Yokozawa back to himself. Their conversation just now had *not* been appropriate to have in front of her. They'd been lucky she'd been asleep, as they wouldn't have been able to explain themselves if she'd happened to overhear them.

To keep from any further unnecessary conversations from starting up, Yokozawa grew quiet, feigning sleepiness, and settled his head against the glass, eyes shut.

Kirishima's voice was soft and secretive as he hazarded, "You going to sleep?"

"—-"

Fine—let him think so. He remained silent in tacit affirmation, and barely caught the quiet chuckle that followed. It was hard to tell if he'd really been fooled, or if he was only humoring Yokozawa.

"…Good night."

"…!" A hand stretched out slowly and gently ruffled his hair, and he desperately bit back the voice that nearly slipped out unthinkingly. His heart was thudding, echoing through his chest with such fervor that he was sure Kirishima could hear it. He hardened his features to keep his agitation from showing, praying that his feigned sleep wouldn't be found out.

"I've brought your drinks! The beers go to…?"

"Oh—you can just set them all down there together." Henmi, who'd volunteered to order drinks for everyone, took over here and began to pass mugs of beer around to everyone. He was clearly the type to put himself in charge of manning the hotpot during winter. "Umm, Yukina-kun, you had…the grapefruit sour, right?"

"Yes, thank you." Taking in hand the glass Henmi passed him, he set it on top of a coaster in front of his seat. A number of the female employees had been casting surreptitious glances his way for a while now; perhaps because he was used to it, the man himself didn't seem bothered by it at all, but Yokozawa couldn't help noticing it and it was seriously getting on his nerves. The seating areas were cordoned off by shoji doors, but the walkway area between rooms was only separated by a partitioning screen. They should've just sprung for a private room.

"Yukina—how much longer will the manager be?"

"He couldn't really be sure, so he made sure to let us know to start without him."

"Did he? Well then I guess we'll get started. Umm, well—good work the other day, everyone. We'll leave things brief for now and be a bit more thorough later."

"Good work!" The four present raised their glasses and brought them together with a loud clink, gulping down their beers. The sensation of the liquid sliding down his throat felt amazing, and he could feel the discomfort that had been building up over the workday fading away.

Today's drinking party was being hosted by Marukawa Shoten, and was meant to celebrate successfully ending the autograph event the other day. Those scheduled to attend were Yokozawa, Henmi, and Katou from Marukawa Shoten, and manager Okada and Yukina from *Books Marimo*. Unfortunately, no other staff members had been able to fit the party into their schedules, so it had turned into a rather cozy little affair. Okada, the guest of honor, was running late, so it really wasn't all that different an atmosphere from a typical night out for drinks.

"Still, I'm quite glad the autograph event ended so smoothly!"

"It was all thanks to you and the others, Yukina-kun. We're truly in your debt." Henmi settled his palms on his thighs and bowed his head deeply.

“We were only doing our jobs, same as always. The fans were extremely well-mannered, so that helped a lot. Ah—but there was a bit of panic when we thought we’d run out of postcards!”

“Yeah, that was all my fault for not checking thoroughly. Sorry about that.” The postcards meant to be distributed as presents had run out in the middle of the event. Yokozawa had paled, panicking that they’d mistakenly ordered the wrong amount when they should’ve had plenty to spare, but when he looked around, he realized that one packet had been mixed in with presents Takanashi had received from the fans. Apparently it had been dropped into the box of letters and gifts when he’d tried to move it.

“Not at all—we should’ve been more alert to the situation. We really weren’t on our game then. But the sense of unity we felt when we found it was kind of amusing, now that I think back on it.”

“We can laugh about it now at least, so all’s well that ends well.”

There were always bound to be a few snafus in any event, so all that mattered was that they pulled it off successfully in the end. The reason they were able to sit here congenially conversing was because they’d gotten through the event without anything major going wrong.

“Sorry for the wait! I have here a salad of assorted seasonal vegetables, a seasonal sashimi platter, and…” The plates they’d ordered earlier were brought in all at once, and the tabletop instantly transformed into a bustling affair.

“How were the Nagoya and Osaka events? About the same number of attendees?”

At Yukina’s question, Henmi puffed his chest out as he took the opportunity to pass around the dishes. “We had quite the turnout at both locations, and nothing went wrong. Let’s see…I suppose there were more male fans at the Nagoya space compared with Tokyo, though.”

“You little liar—you almost got completely lost in Osaka Station, I heard! All confident you knew the way, and then you had to be corrected by the author herself!”

Henmi grew flustered at Yokozawa’s teasing retort, nearly dropping the serving chopsticks he’d just picked up. “Wh—where did you hear that?!” Apparently he’d been hoping to keep that event under the table.

“From Katou, of course. Lucky for you the author knew where she was going.” The reason they’d decided to hold an event in Osaka on the final day was because Takanashi was from the Kansai area and could return home immediately after she finished the autograph event, causing relatively little adverse effect on her work; it was for that reason that they’d put together such a tough schedule.

“Th—that was just, a misunderstanding, that was all. The arrow on the station map was difficult to read so…” Henmi muttered his excuse, blushing all the way to his ears in apparent shame at his mistake.

“Oh, so it was a *misunderstanding*, was it? You seemed pretty confident at the time…”

“Wai—you too, Katou-san?! Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, you know!” Henmi retorted, fists clenched as he was attacked from both sides.

“C’mon, don’t get so bent out of shape. We were just teasing.”

“Then please *stop* enjoying it so much!” Seeming to have realized that it only fanned the flames to keep protesting, he slumped to his seat and started to eat the food he’d gathered for himself all alone.

Watching Henmi pout, Yokozawa recalled a similar experience in his own past. “That reminds me, a long while back, there was one autograph event where not a single book we had ordered for the attendees made it to the bookstore we were at on time.”

Yukina’s expression darkened as he imagined the situation. “On the day of the event? That must have been horrible—what did you do?”

Begged thus for the details, Yokozawa reflected back on the past. The forecast had called for storms in the afternoon, and the skies had erupted in a deluge as soon as they had arrived at the bookstore. If they’d gotten there even ten minutes later, everything would’ve likely been ruined. “We had to haul over 200 books ourselves from a store that had some extra stock. Stacked a bunch of boxes onto a cart and then hopped on the bullet train, making it just in time for the event. I was covered in a cold sweat that time, definitely.”

“What happened to the books that were supposed to have arrived?” Henmi asked, seeming to be in a better mood now. Yokozawa recalled that that had been the biggest riddle at the time.

“Seems they’d been delivered to another branch by mistake and had been sitting around, unnoticed. It was exhausting finding out they were being shipped over just as the event ended.”

“I guess that sort of thing happens now and then, huh. Of all days for them to make an error in shipping…”

“Seriously, geez. But what happened to me was nothing really; sometimes you’ll wind up not having enough sales campaign goods—or having too much—due to mistakes in order volume.”

Henmi braced himself, wary of being teased even further by Yokozawa. “Well that certainly wasn’t me!” He looked like a small animal with his hair standing on end, but Yokozawa didn’t touch on this point.

“Yeah yeah, I know. I just tossed it out there as an example from the past.”

“Of course, you can always order more if you don’t order enough initially, but what about when you’ve ordered too much?”

“They’ll get used eventually, but we’ve still got a mountain stacked up in storage even now. You can’t just toss ‘em out, after all… Ah, but these kinds of stories are probably pretty boring for you guys to listen to.” No university student about to start a job search wanted to hear Yokozawa bitch about his job, surely, and Yokozawa attempted to change the subject—but Yukina shook his head.

“Not at all! I don’t get to hear stories from the sales staff all that often, so I actually find it quite interesting. Oh—well, maybe *interesting* isn’t quite the word, but if you don’t mind, I’d love to hear more.”

“Hmm, let’s see… You do hear about things going wrong quite a bit from salesmen on the road.”

At Yukina’s fervent request, Yokozawa trawled his memory for a story that might go well with booze, when Henmi raised his hand. “Ooh, I have a story I heard from a guy who joined the company at the same time I did! He was doing a sales run in Hokkaido, and when he took a turn in his car, a deer jumped right out at him!”

“A deer?”

“Yup, a wild one! He turned the wheel to try and avoid hitting it—and slammed right into a tree! Had to call a tow-truck to come pick him up and everything. Sounds just like an excuse you’d cook up when you get in a wreck that’s your own fault, right? So no one believed him.”

“Yeah…I think I remember something like that happening myself.” You couldn’t exactly bring a claim against a wild deer, and he recalled how the guy had told the sad tale of having to pay for the repairs out of his own pocket.

“You’ll see them all the time in Hokkaido—deer, that is. I’m a Sapporo boy, so I never encountered any myself, but friends of mine used to see them a lot when they were little.”

“Huh—so you’re from Hokkaido, are you, Yukina? I could’ve sworn you were raised in Tokyo!”

“Yup—I lived there up through high school, then moved to Tokyo for college. I’m a 100% pure-bred Hokkaido man!”

Katou, who’d until this point only been listening to the conversation, slowly opened his mouth. “If we’re discussing Hokkaido now—I’ve got a story, too. A guy who went there on a business trip was using a map he’d gotten from his predecessor on his way to a bookstore—but when he got there, neither the road he was supposed to take nor the shop itself were anywhere to be found, he was really confused. Said it felt like someone was playing a joke on him.”

“So…the store had gone out of business or something?”

“Probably; you always hear that it’s tough managing a business in the boonies. But—I mean, I can understand the shop not being there anymore, but do roads tend to just disappear?”

“Who knows…maybe it was covered in snow or something? Then you could easily get lost like Henmi over here.”

“Wai—now *you’re* in on it, Yukina-kun?!” Henmi’s shoulders slumped at being used as the punch line, and he seemed to give up the fight.

“I’m *kidding*.”

Everyone soothed Henmi, who'd unthinkingly been rising to his feet, and pushed drinks his way. The guy couldn't hold his liquor well and was already starting to get a bit carried away. Just as Yokozawa was reminding himself that if they weren't careful, Henmi could turn into a rather foul drunk, Henmi changed the subject.

"That reminds me, Yokozawa-san—how'd you get to become so close with Kirishima-san? You used to hang around mostly with Takano-san before, didn't you?"

"…We just happened to run into each other at a bar one night, and when we started a conversation, we realized we had a lot in common, that's all." Sure, that was leaving out a *lot*, but not one bit of it was untrue. He just…wasn't spilling any unnecessary details.

Henmi wasn't quite satisfied yet, though. "What bar? Take me with you next time!"

"Why the hell do I have to drag you along? If you're there too, it'll just seem like an extension of work—no thank you."

"C'mon, it's fine! I've been thinking it'd be nice to have a chat with Kirishima-san! He's so cool and great at his job, and he's raising a kid all on his own—don'tcha think that's amazing?? I hope I can be as competent a guy as Kirishima-san someday!"

Seeing Henmi mooning over Kirishima this way, eyes sparkling, Yokozawa snorted a laugh. "Yeah right, good luck with *that*. It's impossible." It was no easy feat to get to Kirishima's level—not only for Henmi, but for anyone, himself included.

"You dunno if it's impossible or not! Gimme another 10 years and maybe I'll be married with a kid of my own, working even harder than I am now! Ah—wait, are you perhaps *jealous*, Yokozawa-san??"

At Henmi's probing question, Yokozawa nearly spit out the beer he'd been chugging. Coughing roughly, he dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. "Wh—who the hell would be jealous…?!"

"Oh come on, Yokozawa-san, it's all right! Don't worry—I still look up to you, too!"

"Eh? Ah—oh, oh yeah…" Realizing he and Henmi had been looking at the targets of jealousy from completely different angles, Yokozawa calmed down. Shit, this was

bad for his heart. Henmi could be pretty thick most of the time, but he could also occasionally show a flash of painful insight; you couldn't underestimate him.

The shame of being mistaken as jealous grated, but he'd only be digging himself even deeper if he attempted to correct the misconception. He swallowed whatever he wanted to say and blankly stuffed a piece of fried food into his mouth.

"Looks like everyone's drinks are getting low—shall we order some more?" Yukina opened the menu, taking the atmosphere into account. "I think I'm going to have another beer. What about you, Yokozawa-san?"

"Hmm…guess I'll have some *shouchuu*." When he indicated a famous brand from Kyuushuu, Katou ordered the same thing. After having the servers clear away the empty glasses and dishes, they ordered some more food as well.

Yokozawa was finishing off the last of the salad by himself, when Yukina started, "That reminds me… Matsumoto-san keeps asking me when you're going to come around again, Yokozawa-san. Seems she still hasn't gotten to thank you."

"Ah—geez, I *told* her she doesn't have to thank me. Just tell her she doesn't have to worry, would you?" He appreciated the gratitude, but it felt awkward having her continually fawning over him. Maybe it was their gap in ages leaving them with a gap in how close it was appropriate be.

"You should tell her that kind of thing yourself—I mean, it sounds like she *wants* to see you, after all."

"Huh?" Yokozawa furrowed his brow at Yukina's comment. He couldn't fathom why on earth this girl would want to go out of her way to see him, and laughter bubbled up over the confused expression on his face.

"Like I said—I think she likes you. You're pretty thick sometimes, aren't you, Yokozawa-san?"

"Yukina-kun, are you serious?!" Henmi launched himself forward, desperately curious. He seemed ready and raring to turn Yokozawa into a subject of conversation now, possibly as revenge for earlier.

"Well she's never outright told me as much—but in all likelihood, yes. I have pretty good instincts for things like this. You seem pretty intimidating, Yokozawa-san, but

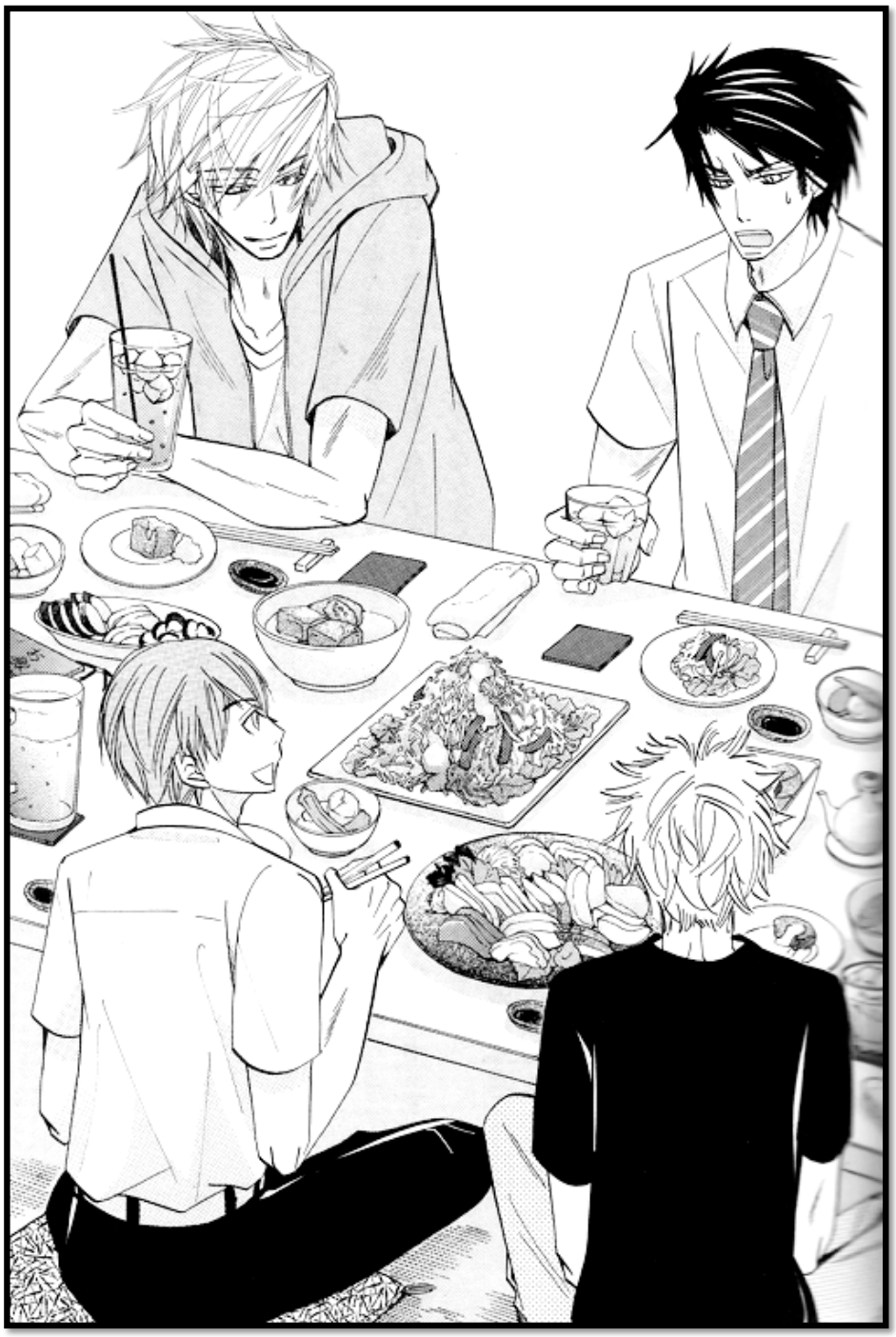
underneath, you're actually really well-grounded and kind. Aren't you popular at your office?"

"'F course not!" he snorted, laughing off Yukina's suggestion, and reached out his chopsticks for a block of deep-friend tofu. When the server arrived with their extra drink orders, he grabbed his glass and set it before him.

"Are you sure you just haven't noticed that people like you? What do you think, Henmi-san?"

With the ball lobbed his way by Yukina, Henmi settled in to think, a pensive expression on his face as he hunched his shoulders. "I dunno… He's just as scary even around the office, and women tend to steer clear of him. But—I guess that hasn't been the case as much lately, huh? He's in a better mood these days, and I feel like more and more people are inviting him out for drinks."

"Geez—have these kinds of conversations when I'm *not* around, would you?" He openly gaped at Henmi, who was innocently blabbing the kinds of things you usually would say behind someone's back.



When he directed a sharp glare in the guy's direction, Henmi promptly apologized. "Ah—I'm sorry! The booze left me a little loose-lipped, I guess. But…what're you gonna do? When you think about it, the fact that she knew about you even before the incident…means she was interested in you, right?"

Turning a curt expression toward Henmi, who was staring at him with eyes filled with curiosity, he returned sharply, "I'm not gonna *do* anything!"

"But she's a college student! You don't have a girlfriend now, right?"

Kirishima's face immediately popped into the forefront of his mind, and his agitation nearly bled onto his face—but he hid it by bringing his glass to his lips. "Why the hell do I have to discuss my private life with you?"

Still, Henmi pressed on. "Eh?! Wait—so then you *do* have one?!"

"God, shut up. And anyways—what does her being a college student have to do with anything? This isn't some shoujo manga, you know; she wouldn't fall for me over some stupid thing like that."

As he was arguing with Henmi, Yukina put in his own opinion. "You think? I think it's quite amazing when someone saves you when you're in a bind. You can fall in love with someone for the most seemingly inconsequential of reasons."

"…You sound like you're speaking from experience."

A careful smile bloomed across Yukina's graceful features. "Well, no more than anyone else."

"And hearing it from you…makes me strangely want to agree."

"It does?"

It was advice from someone younger than himself, but there was a strange weight to Yukina's words. There was the fact of course that they way he spoke didn't sound like he was teasing, but it also sounded like he'd been through something like this before as well. Still, he didn't want to continue this conversation any further, and he forcibly put the matter to rest. "Well, whatever—this conversation is finished. It's rude to just put words in her mouth when she's not here to defend herself."

"Yeah, you're right—we'll just let the two of you work things out on your own…"

“Huh?” He cut a sharp glare at Henmi who didn’t seem to know when to quit. No matter how many warnings he tossed out, the guy just didn’t quite *get it*, so he was understandably fed up with it by now.

“Oh, nothing at all! Ah—sorry, could we get another beer over here??” Henmi flagged down a passing attendant in an attempt to dispel the atmosphere in the room, downing the rest of his beer in one gulp. The guy wasn’t exactly a heavyweight when it came to drinking, and Yokozawa was just starting to truly worry if Henmi would be all right at the pace he was going—when the man of the hour finally showed his face.

“Sorry for the wait!”

Henmi quickly turned the discussion to the newly arrived lifeboat. “Hey! We’ve been waiting for you, Manager!” Yokozawa sighed at how out-of-hand the guy was getting—then raised his face to glance up when Okada continued, sounding slightly apologetic.

“Oh, sorry—I brought along an extra; is that okay?”

“Of course, by all mea—” He swallowed his words at the end when he realized that it was *Matsumoto* that Okada had brought with him.

“I—I’m really sorry, barging in on your gathering like this. I’m really…out of place, huh?”

“Not at all, not at all! Having a girl here will make this an even livelier get-together, so we’re thrilled! Oh—oops, does that count as sexual harassment?” With the sudden appearance of the person they’d just been gossiping about, Henmi was in high spirits. He was patently teasing Yokozawa, who was beside himself with anxiety.

“Henmi, pipe down. Isn’t it a bit early for you to be letting the booze go to your head?”

“I’m not drunk yet~! Ooh, Yukina-kun, scoot over, scoot over!”

“Oh, sure—Matsumoto-san, you can sit over here.”

“Eh? Oh no—I’ll be fine on the end here!”

She tried to stop them, but those around him seemed to have the same idea and vacated the space next to Yokozawa. He wanted to tell them to cut out the unnecessary actions, but fumbled the attempt, and pursing his lips, he fell silent.

“Umm, then…please excuse the interruption…” She was clearly nervous, but hesitantly settled herself between Yukina and Yokozawa. He turned a sharp glare at all who were regarding them coolly from across the table, but did nothing more to exert his authority for today.

He typically would’ve yelled at them to cut it out, but with Matsumoto right there, he couldn’t bring himself to raise his voice.

“Oh, so what’ll you have to drink?”

Okada, seated directly across from Yokozawa, passed a drink menu to Matsumoto. “Hmm, I think I’ll have a beer myself…”

“Th—then could I get a ginger ale?”

Taking in her expression as she shyly voiced her order, Yokozawa couldn’t deny that there might be something to Kirishima’s and Yukina’s suggestions. Kirishima had warned him not to do anything that might make her fall for him, and he’d laughed it off at the time as utterly ridiculous, but maybe it wasn’t so ridiculous at all…

He couldn’t be sure just what type of ‘like’ this was…but it was clear she had some measure of feelings for Yokozawa.

“One beer and one ginger ale, is it? I guess I’ll have another beer myself; what about you, Yukina-kun?”

“I think I’ll have whatever Yokozawa has.”

“Gotcha. Excuse me! We’d like to make an order here!” Henmi, seated nearest to the aisle, put in their orders, and they brought the room back to order. When the drinks arrived, they raised their glasses in the second toast of the evening.

“You were still working this late in the evening?” Given that she was seated right next to him, he couldn’t exactly ignore Matsumoto, and he therefore started an innocent conversation with the clearly nervous girl.

“Oh, no—I actually finished a bit before, but a sempai was showing me how to do something, and so it got late and… But still—because of that, I got to come here this evening, so I suppose I was lucky in that sense.”

“Well—eat and drink as much as you want. Everything’s covered as an expense tonight, so don’t hold back; feel free to try things you wouldn’t normally eat.”

“Thank you; I’ll take you up on that offer, then.”

He turned a sharp glare at Henmi, who was leering suggestively from across the table, and brought his glass of *shouchuu* to his lips. Truthfully, he was starting to lose track of how best to keep some distance between himself and Matsumoto—what was ‘normal’? He couldn’t tell at all right now. While he had no intention of doing anything suggestive, he had to be careful of his unconscious words and actions.

“What’re you drinking there, Yokozawa-san?”

He breathed a sigh of relief when Okada called out to him from across the table. Perhaps he’d realized he was worrying about something. ”*Shouchuu*. It’s quite easy to drink and leaves you feeling refreshed.”

“Then I think I’ll have that next!”

Readjusting his posture as if clinging to a life raft, Yokozawa repeated his thanks. “Okada-san, we are truly grateful for your taking care of us the other day. Thank you so very much.” He bowed his head deeply, but Okada just waved him off.

“We’re the ones who should be thanking you! I’m glad we requested that autograph event even though we knew it was likely useless. Just between you and me—I was sure we’d get turned down! It seemed she hadn’t appeared in public ever before, so we figured she didn’t like that sort of thing.”

“Actually, a lot of us at the office had the same feelings. But we decided to confirm, just in case, and sounded her out. She wasn’t very on-board with the idea at first apparently, but she did genuinely seem to want to meet her readers.”

“I see. Apparently there were a few customers who’d just been passing through on the day of the event who became interested in her works, and her previous works are in quite high demand now. I even put in an order for more stock before coming here tonight.”

“Really? That’s wonderful. I find it a fascinating series myself as well, so I really do want it to sell more.” If they’d been able to reach even customers who’d previously never been interested in her works, then it was definitely a success as a sales event.

“It’s getting more and more exciting with each new volume, isn’t it? I can’t even imagine what’s going to happen next, so I’m really looking forward to next month’s installment.”

“As am I. I can’t wait for next month’s issue.”

Katou, seated next to Okada, cut in here with a smug expression on his face. “You’d better look forward to it! Next issue’ll blow your socks off!” He likely couldn’t hold himself back from commenting on the very work he himself was in charge of.

“So what happens next, then? Come on, just give us a little hint!”

“If I did that, it’d take away some of the fun of reading it yourself! But I will say this: an unexpected character makes a return, and I really think all of the fans will be thrilled with it.”

Okada grabbed his head and groaned at the stingy spoiler. “Wow, seriously?? Now I’m even more curious!”

“Well when you’ve read it—be sure to let me know what you think! I’m really curious as to how readers will react this time.”

“Careful—you tell me to discuss it and I’ll discuss it til you’re sick of me!” Okada tossed back fervently, hand gripped into a fist. While many who worked at book stores were avid readers, Okada was quite a bookworm, well-versed in shounen manga of both the present and past.

“How are the other new releases doing? I don’t get a really bad sense myself, but it does seem a bit irregular.”

“Hmm, yes, well while there are some that are doing a bit more poorly than expected, sales are going quite well overall, I think. I get the feeling that the female-oriented campaigns going on right now are doing particularly well. Perhaps we’ll see another bump in sales by next weekend.”

“We can only hope!”

Most of the publishing market was doing relatively poorly at the moment, and the sales and editing departments were both trying anything they could in an effort to achieve even a small increase in sales. No matter how amazing the work, there was no way to let the world know that fact if they couldn't get anyone to read it.

"And also…ah, yes. I know it's not your area, Yokozawa, but the Sapphire novels also aren't doing bad. Oh—and Yukina's renewed the display on the tabletop, so please come check it out."

"Well then—I'll be in to look around the beginning of next week, so I'll see you then. I'll probably be able to give you some more news then as well, so I look forward to it."

"You can ask some over-the-top things now and then, so I'm a little worried—but I'll be waiting with bells on!" he returned laughingly.

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"Thank you for the meal."

"Not at all—quite the contrary, thank you for coming out with us tonight. I look forward to working together further in the future."

The drinking party was finally over; they'd started out discussing work, but as everyone got a bit of booze in them, the conversations devolved into ones of little worth. Okada in particular had been quite excited to discuss books he'd read recently. Yokozawa greatly enjoyed speaking with him, as they shared similar tastes.

Perhaps he'd unconsciously been avoiding speaking with Matsumoto in that sense as well, troubled with how best to interact with her. He rarely had the chance to speak with younger women, so he wasn't exactly clear on just what to say.

With how far apart he and Hiyori were in age, there was no problem—but he couldn't imagine the things that female high school and college students thought about. Once Hiyori reached that age, maybe he wouldn't be able to understand her either…

"Whoa—are you all right, Henmi-san?" Katou's worried voice reached his ears, and he turned to find Henmi staggering to his feet. He was finished for the evening.

"'M fiiiiiiiine, jus' fiiiiiine."

“How exactly is this *fine*? You’re pissed out of your skull.”

Henmi’s lips pursed at Yokozawa’s comment. “‘M not drunk at all!”

But Yokozawa had no intention of wasting his time listening to the ramblings of a drunk. On top of his unsteady footing, his speech was slurred as well. Yokozawa wasn’t exactly inexperienced in this field, but why did they always feel like they were never drunk enough to be *drunk*?

“Katou—you’re headed home the same was as Henmi, right?”

“Well, yes, but…wait, you don’t mean for me to take him with me, do you?!”

“Sorry—I’ll leave him in your care.”

“Can’t we just…leave him here?” Katou pressed, expression dejected. He probably hadn’t expected to draw the short straw.

“Ask him yourself.”

“‘F you’re worried ’bout me, ‘m juuuuust fine!” Henmi sounded completely and utterly confident in himself—and Katou let out a long sigh.

“…Guess not.”

“Thanks for taking care of him.” He clapped Katou on the back as he attempted to steady the wobbling Henmi, then grabbed a cab for the pair. Ensuring that they got into the car safely, he opened the passenger-side door and called out to the driver, “Please take them—and Katou, I want the change back for this.”

“Ah—thank you very much.”

He watched the taxi speed away, one job done for the time being, then turned back to Okada and Matsumoto who he’d kept waiting. “My apologies for the wait.”

“Nah, I should be apologizing to you—I might’ve given Henmi-san a bit too much to drink.”

“It’s probably only enough to give him a bit of a headache tomorrow.” He glanced over to Yukina, who was looking on worriedly. “What about you—you okay?” He seemed to have only ordered sours and other light beverages most of the evening, but he’d still drunk quite a bit.

“Yes, I’m quite all right. I took you up on your offer and had a lot to eat.”

Yukina’s unconcerned response invited laughter—just as he’d professed, he’d eaten quite a lot for one person. It left one feeling full just watching him; Yokozawa had had that kind of an appetite at one point, but nowadays it would destroy his stomach. “Well, if you enjoyed yourself, then that’s all for the best.”

“Well, shall we part ways here? You’re on the subway, aren’t you, Yokozawa-san? And you as well, right Matsumoto?”

“Ah—well, yes…” At Okada’s question, Matsumoto nodded meekly.

“Well then, could I ask you to take care of Matsumoto here? I’m a little concerned about letting a girl go home alone at this hour.”

Yokozawa somehow managed to stifle the agitation that threatened to show on his face. “Oh—ah, yes, of course.” He’d figured this might happen, given that they were using the same train line. He had no place being surprised by this turn now of all times.

“We’re headed the other direction, so—thanks for this evening!”

Okada and Yukina took their leave, leaving Yokozawa alone with Matsumoto. An uncomfortable silence settled between them—but maybe Yokozawa was the only one who felt awkward and nervous right now; after all, the reason he was so unnaturally *aware* of the situation was because Kirishima’s warning was flitting around inside his head.

“Ah, umm—I…really, I can go home by myself…”

“There’s no need for us to part ways when we’re going the same direction. Look—the train seems to be arriving, let’s go.”

“Ah—right!”

Fighting against the oncoming crowd, they hurried down to the platform—but the train had just left.

“Aww, we missed it…”

“Looks that way…” According to the time table, they had a bit of time before the next train arrived, and Yokozawa ground his teeth in frustration at his bad timing. Unsure of whether or not a conversation would last in such an empty space, he brought his feet to a stop before a random boarding position marker.

“……..”

“……..”

With Yokozawa unsure of just what to talk about, the deafening silence continued—and Matsumoto turned out to be the first one to dispel the awkward atmosphere.

“Umm…so, I’m sorry for having to be included in the festivities today.”

“Nah; not like you even ate enough to merit an apology.”

Okada, heavy drinker that he was, drank enough to kill a man, and Yukina’s appetite had made his eyes bug out; but Matsumoto’s bill for the evening had been a tiny thing comparatively.

“Please let me repay the favor next time—I still haven’t gotten to thank you for the other day, after all.”

“Ah… Listen, about that—please just don’t worry about it, all right? You did a great job helping out at the autograph even, so we’re even now, see?”

“I…suppose so…”

Matsumoto’s expression clouded over slightly, and Yokozawa figured he must’ve hurt her feelings somehow. Desperately trying to figure out how to support her now, he continued, “You really were a great help, by the way. With the event, of course—but with Hiyori as well; thank you.”

“Oh no—it was nothing, really. I just stayed with Hiyori-chan, and she’s such a well-put-together girl I’m sure she would’ve been fine without me. You seem quite close with her, Yokozawa-san.”

“Ah—well, I suppose.” Maybe this hadn’t been such a great topic to bring up after all. If Kirishima had been in his shoes, he probably could’ve come up with any number of meaningless, innocent topics to discuss, but for Yokozawa, it was useless.

“Do you…like children, Yokozawa-san?”

“I guess I’m okay with them.” Despite his outward appearance, he’d hardly ever found himself hated by children or animals. It suited him more to approach children seriously than to feign niceties with adults.

“I was so surprised—your expression completely changed when you were speaking with Hiyori-chan. And—Kirishima-san surprised me as well! He’s so stylish, like a model almost. Marukawa Shoten employees so many attractive people—I’m jealous.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, like—that managing director you see on television and in magazines all the time is really cool. And the editor who’s always chatting with Yukina is adorable… Oh, I suppose it’s not very polite to refer to someone older than me as ‘adorable’ huh!”

“‘Editor’…? Oh—if you’re talking about *that* guy, he definitely could pass as a college student couldn’t he…” At Matsumoto’s description, a face rose in the back of his mind—if she was describing him as ‘adorable’ it could only be that baby-faced guy. Yokozawa had been surprised himself when he’d realized the guy was actually older than him as well.

The editing department of shoujo manga magazine *Emerald* was definitely stuffed to the gills with attractive men. Even authors signed with other magazines knew about their famed looks, and no small number of female authors attended parties simply in the hopes of catching a glimpse of them.

There were rumors that they hired based on looks, but it was, in truth, sheer coincidence that brought such a good-looking group together. There was no way anyone would ever hire an editor based on what they looked like. He wasn’t sure on what basis other businesses hired, but perhaps the fact that one particular department stood out just left that impression.

“It’s probably just that the ones who stood out during hiring happened to be good-looking. After all, you say that kind of thing—but don’t you think Yukina back there’s a hell of a lot easier on the eyes?”

He couldn't help tipping his hat in admiration to those sickeningly sweet facial features that could put an idol to shame. Apparently no small amount of customers dropped by the shop solely to catch a glimpse of him.

"Hmm, I guess I'm kind of…used to Yukina-kun? I can definitely appreciate that he has a beautiful face, but he's almost…*too* beautiful."

"That just means he's not your type, doesn't it?"

Matsumoto chuckled softly at the conclusion he proposed. "Probably so." Her chuckles continued for a few moments further before she fell silent again.

Yokozawa once more groped for an idea on how to draw out the conversation that had died, but nothing came to mind, leaving him no recourse but to curse his inability to make small talk. They'd already talked up a storm about books earlier, so he was all out of topic suggestions.

Pets—that would be a safe enough topic; but then, he'd pushed people away more than once or twice talking about his cat, and self-conscious about appearing too much like a doting parent, he decided it better to avoid that topic. As he frantically scoured his mind, though, Matsumoto threw out a question that sent him for a loop:

"Yokozawa-san…do you have a lover right now?"

"Huh?"

The moment the word 'lover' fell on his ears, Kirishima's face rose in his mind's eye. It wasn't as if he was about to blurt out his thoughts, so there was no logical reason for him to panic, but his pulse still quickened.

He supposed there was nothing wrong with calling their relationship one of 'lovers'. It left him feeling a bit uneasy, but there really was no other more appropriate word for it.

Glancing at Matsumoto, he noticed her expression was quite anxious. She'd attempted to phrase it in a casual manner, but she'd probably really had to work herself up for it.

"Oh—a guy like you must have a wonderful lover, huh! I'm sorry, that was a really weird thing to ask…" She seemed to have mistaken his silence for offense, hastening to correct herself.

He could've tied everything up and ended the conversation right there with a simple *It's fine, I wasn't offended.*

But while he typically avoided saying unnecessary things at all costs in an effort to keep anyone from finding out about his relationship with Kirishima…it wasn't in his best interests to keep quiet right now, he felt.

"…I do."

It was spoken with a low, roughened voice, almost indecipherable and completely unlike him. Probably because he was uncharacteristically nervous right now.

"Eh…?" Perhaps she hadn't heard him, for she glanced up with question in her eyes, and Yokozawa swallowed the lump in his throat and clarified:

"If you're asking if I'm in a relationship with someone—then yes, I am."

It was the first time he'd ever told anyone about his relationship with Kirishima. Sweat broke out across the palms of the fists he had clenched at his sides.

"Oh—of course you do!" Her voice was slightly trembling, but Yokozawa pretended not to notice. "Do you mind…if I ask what sort of person they are?"

"…Someone I greatly respect."

Yokozawa himself was shocked at the words that slipped from his tongue so easily—they must have been his true feelings. Sure, Kirishima could piss him off like no other, but Yokozawa trusted him even more than that, looked up to him.

However, he had absolutely no intention of ever letting the guy know as much—and truthfully, he'd never meant to let anyone else know, either. Overwhelmed at how he'd said such embarrassing things with a straight face, Yokozawa felt his face grow warm. He could hardly pass this off as being because he was drunk now, and he found himself struck with the overwhelming urge to flee the scene.

"Uwah!" He'd shoved his hands into his pockets, feeling unable to keep calm, and gripped his cell phone tight in one hand—when it suddenly began to vibrate.

"Y—Yokozawa-san…?"

“Sorry, it’s my phone.” He’d been utterly shocked, having completely forgotten he’d set it to silent mode. He covered up the embarrassing yelp he’d given with a cough, then checked the incoming call screen.

It was Kirishima. Why the *hell* did he have to call at *now* of all times? For a brief moment, he considered ignoring the call, but given the late hour, he might have had some urgent reason for calling.

“Sorry, let me just—Yes? This is Yokozawa.”

*“So you finally decided to pick up? Where are you?”*

He dropped his voice as low as possible, all too aware that he was having this conversation right in front of Matsumoto. “About to get on the train. Did you need something, calling at this hour?”

*“Not particularly—just wondering what time you were coming home. I’m bored without Hiyo here.”*

Oh right—Hiyori had mentioned going to the country and spending the week with her maternal grandparents. Several years back, Hiyori’s grandmother and grandfather on her mother’s side had returned to her grandfather’s hometown and were living there now, apparently. They occasionally sent local delicacies to Kirishima’s apartment.

“Did you forget? I told you I had a drinking party tonight with the bookstore staff and I’d be late with it so I was going back to my place, remember?”

*“Ooohhh…that was today huh…”* Yokozawa had made sure to let him know his plans for today ahead of time, but it seemed to have slipped his mind.

“Yeah, so that’s how it is. Sorry—but I’m leaving Sorata in your care.”

*“He’s sleeping in Hiyo’s room. By ‘bookstore’—you mean Books Marimo, right? Was that chick from the other day there too?*

Yokozawa furrowed his brow at the unexpected close questioning from Kirishima. He almost sounded like he was interrogating a child who’d broken curfew. “…That’s none of your business.” He could hardly explain that the very girl Kirishima had warned him not to encourage was standing right next to him, and his response turned sharp.

If he confessed that they'd been drinking together up until just a few minutes ago, Kirishima would've returned him the shocked reply of, "*You're so naive*," without a doubt, and just as he was cooking up a lie, Matsumoto suggested hesitantly, "Umm should I…give you some privacy here?"

She probably felt awkward, thinking she was intruding on a private conversation. Naturally, no matter how Yokozawa tried to keep his voice down, she was going to catch some of their discussion standing next to him as she was. Still—he couldn't deny the bad timing of it all.

He was grateful for her consideration, but this might have just made things worse. Fighting the urge to massage his temples, he responded shortly, "No, you're fine—I'm almost finished here."

"It looks like it'll still be a bit more before the train arrives so—I'm going to get a drink." With that, she darted off towards the vending machines. Kirishima on the other end of the line had probably heard her.

*"…That girl you're with right now—is that her?"*

"We were heading the same direction." He couldn't help that it sounded like an excuse.

It was true that they were heading in the same direction, and they'd be separating at a station on the way, so it wasn't as if they were *purposefully* together right now—and it was pretty damn annoying to have that brought into question. Quite the contrary, he had no reason at all to feel guilty.

But Kirishima's voice sounded distinctly displeased. *"Didn't I just warn you against this? Did you forget how I told you not to thoughtlessly encourage her?"*

"I—I didn't *forget*." His voice wavered a bit on the end—mostly because the situation had escalated just how Kirishima had predicted it would. She hadn't exactly confessed to him, sure, but that line of questioning just now had been close enough. Nevertheless, he returned sharply, "It's nothing for you to be concerned with."

*"I wonder about that. You're utterly oblivious, so there's no telling what you've said or done."*

"Then what the hell do you *want* me to do? How am I supposed to be careful of something I'm not even aware of?" His ire rose with being treated like a child this way, and his voice grew harsh.

*"Well you could start with not being alone with her, like I said!"*

"God you're fucking annoying. It's none of your damn business who I associate with. Besides—" Yokozawa turned the tables on Kirishima's egotistical suggestions, "—you're one to talk!" Yeah, maybe he hadn't been as careful as he should've been, just like Kirishima was accusing, but he was hardly the only one failing in that respect.

He knew that there were plenty of women around Kirishima who had feelings for him, and Kirishima was friendlier with them than he was with Yokozawa, even inviting them out for dinner.

*"Our situations are completely different. There aren't many who'd get serious over a single father, but they might get serious about* you *if you're nice to them."*

"It's not different *at all*. You know, you've also got—" He knew there were several female editors who seriously had feelings for Kirishima. But—he couldn't bring himself to admit as much, and cut himself off in mid-sentence. "…Forget it. The train's coming now; I'm hanging up."

*"Yokozawa—"*

He ended the call before Kirishima could finish, then powered down his phone. Slipping his phone casually into his pocket, he released a deep sigh.

It felt like they'd done nothing but argue with each other lately. Tiny things that typically wouldn't have bothered either of them now irritated, and they unthinkingly lost their tempers with one another. They were like a couple of rebellious teenagers. Yeah…that was *exactly* what they were like.

While he was busy being utterly disgusted with himself, a tone sounded announcing the arrival of the train. "Ah…" He suddenly remembered that he wasn't alone here, and when he glanced about hurriedly, Matsumoto appeared, pale and apologizing.

"I—I'm sorry, was there a misunderstanding because of me…?"

The irritation in Yokozawa's voice would've made it clear to any eavesdroppers that he was fighting with the person on the other end of the line. No matter how far away

she'd been, it couldn't be helped that she'd overheard given the quiet of the empty platform.

Truthfully, though, the reason they'd gotten into it with one another had been due to issues between the two of them, and it hadn't been Matsumoto's doing in the least. "Sorry; you shouldn't have had to hear that. It happens all the time between us so—don't worry about it," he awkwardly explained to Matsumoto, who looked on apologetically.

Though while he'd brushed it off as something that 'happens all the time,' Kirishima's attitude had been a bit worrisome. He'd thought about it before as well—but Kirishima seemed strangely sensitive about Matsumoto. He'd never received that sort of warning before, and Kirishima considered himself to be quite the gentleman—there'd never been any issues in the past when they'd walked home with any of their female coworkers.

He couldn't imagine that Matsumoto had possibly done anything that could be construed as rude to Kirishima—and even if she had, Kirishima wasn't the type to fly off the handle over such a trivial matter. Considering that, Yokozawa concluded that he *must* have done something without realizing it—he just couldn't figure out *what*.

None of this made any sense—and he found himself grappling more with confusion than anger.

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His stomach felt a little queasy; this didn't bode well. Stress-related ulcers were common enough among salarymen, and perhaps he'd grown cocky because he'd been doing relatively well lately.

"I think I drank too much…"

He'd let the booze flow a bit more freely than usual tonight simply because it had been so enjoyable discussing books with someone as knowledgeable as Okada. One reason he'd gotten dragged along by Okada's enthusiasm and increased his own rate of drinking. Maybe he should hold back on the booze for a while. If he got seriously sick from this, it would take a while to recover fully.

But the other reason he'd had so much to drink this evening…had been due to none other than Kirishima. Even now as he struggled to determine what was the cause of his foul mood, he still couldn't come to any firm conclusion.

He released the umpteenth sigh of the night and stepped off the elevator, trudging down the hallway toward his apartment on exhausted feet—when he noticed a large figure standing in front of his door and instinctively braced himself.

"…Kirishima-san?"

"Welcome back." Kirishima uncrossed the arms he'd had settled over his chest and turned Yokozawa's way.

"Sh—shit, don't scare me like that. Do you have any idea what time it is? What if I'd thought you were a burglar or something and called the police? Tell me if you're going to come over."

He hadn't expected to have to see the guy tonight, and was suitably agitated for it. When he babbled his questions at Kirishima, he was returned a sighed response of, "My call wouldn't go through."

"…!" At the pointed response, Yokozawa immediately recalled that he'd turned off his cell phone. He regretted his one-sided rejection—but at the same time, he was left wondering why Kirishima had felt he needed to pursue the matter tonight and not some later point. He coughed away the awkward atmosphere and purposefully changed the subject, "Well—I assume you must have some reason for having come all the way over to my place, yeah?"

Despite the questioning, he did distantly suspect that the reason Kirishima was here was probably to do with their conversation earlier—but the response Kirishima returned was not what he'd been expecting.

"I just wanted to see your face."

"Huh? What the hell does that mean? You can see me anytime. Geez, I can understand you're a little lonely without Hiyo there, but get a grip on yourself."

"That's not what I meant."

“Then explain yourself—and, you’ve got my key, right? You should’ve just let yourself in.” He’d given Kirishima a key case as a present on his recent birthday, and after being begged for a spare key, he’d grudgingly given it over a few days later.

And yet—Kirishima had never used that key even once since receiving it. After all, they spent most of their days together at Kirishima’s place, and Kirishima had never had any reason to visit Yokozawa’s room before.

“Would you…not have minded if I’d gone in on my own?”

“Huh?”

“I can’t go barging in uninvited without the owner of the apartment around, can I?”

“Well it’s not like I care all that much if it’s you… Whatever, get inside.” His neighbors were going to complain if they hung around outside talking, so he unlocked the door and guided Kirishima inside. The air in the room, closed off all day, was warm and close.

Kirishima removed his shoes, expression frozen in a sullen grimace—it was the first time Yokozawa had ever seen him so low-key. Unsure of just how to approach the guy, Yokozawa kept his comments innocent and inoffensive. “I’ll just…turn on the air conditioner.”

“Okay…”

“You want something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“……..”

He couldn’t read Kirishima tonight. Even at times before when he’d grown short in his responses under the weight of uncomfortable tension between them, he’d never so boldly displayed his displeasure as he was now.

The distance between them couldn’t last with this silence. He opened the door to the refrigerator and pulled out a large bottle of barley tea, pouring a glass for himself and downing it in one gulp to help shake off the buzz of the alcohol.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he found Kirishima inspecting Yokozawa's room, which he was visiting for the first time. Before, when he'd had Kirishima bring him by his apartment after Sorata's hospital scare, Kirishima had waited for him in the car. It was a bit discomfiting having his private space so thoroughly inspected, but there was nothing he was embarrassed about Kirishima seeing.

"Pretty empty apartment you've got here."

"All I do when I get home is sleep; it's plenty good enough for that."

Novels often depicted images of dreary rooms so sparse they could be mistaken for model rooms for display purposes only, but Yokozawa's apartment was even worse. His bedroom consisted of merely a bookcase and his bed, and in his living room were a low table, a television set, and Sorata's sleeping mat.

"You sure you shouldn't just move in with us? Sorata's already living there, after all."

"Are you an idiot? I can't do that—if I did, I'd have to notify the company. And what would I tell my parents?"

While he may have been spending more time at Kirishima's place, it was quite a tall order to suggest they live together. There was the problem of how best to explain it to the people around them, but more so there was the issue of Yokozawa's feelings on the matter. If they had been two people of the opposite sex dating, there probably wouldn't be any of these niggling, annoying details to worry about. Hell, if Kirishima had been dating a woman, they probably could have even considered the possibility that he'd remarried.

"Oh yeah… I guess so…" Kirishima muttered, almost to himself, and pulled out a chair from the table, casually settling into it. Unable to stand around the whole time in the kitchen, Yokozawa took a seat across the table from Kirishima.

Takano always used to sit in this seat. He'd sit here, petting Sorata on his lap, while he waited for Yokozawa to finish cooking dinner—and when Yokozawa set down a meal for two before him, it had filled the whole table.

"'S that where Sorata usually sleeps?"

"Usually. He sleeps in my bed in winter."

"For having such a hefty attitude, he sure can be needy sometimes."

"That's how cats are."

"He's just *tsundere*—like you."

"Who're you calling a *tsundere*?!"

Did Kirishima actually intend to just continue this meaningless conversation? He was growing irritated with the way Kirishima sat there, refusing to get to the heart of the matter, when Kirishima tossed out a surprising question.

"How…do you feel about me?"

"*How do I*…why would you ask something like that right now?"

"Then when should I ask you? The only things we ever talk about are Hiyori, Sorata, or work. Can you even remember the last time we talked about each other?"

"That's…" They hardly even discussed anything to do with one another. Yokozawa used the excuse that there was just nothing *to* discuss, but really he was just cut off at the pass by embarrassment and hesitation, leaving him without the courage to bring up any topics. So he wound up taking refuge in talking about Hiyori or Sorata.

It wasn't that he didn't *want* to know more about Kirishima—quite the contrary, there were dozens of things he wanted to ask.

It had been sheer coincidence learning the guy's birthday, and he knew almost nothing else of the guy's basic stats. Hell, Kirishima's subordinates probably knew him better than Yokozawa did.

But there was something he needed to do before he learned any of that: if he couldn't do something about that lump lodged in his throat, he was never going to be able to face Kirishima properly.

Utterly at a loss for words but steeling himself nonetheless, Yokozawa started, "…That's not what you came to talk about, though, is it? If you want to continue our conversation from before, then why not just do so?"

"…Yeah, you're probably right."

"*Probably*?" Irritation rose within him at the inability for their conversation to progress; did the guy seriously intend to avoid this discussion *now* of all times? Fed

up with the irritation, Yokozawa had reached his limit. “All right—I really don’t understand why, but did you have some problem with my going home with that girl? What sense was there in purposefully taking different routes when our destinations were in the same direction?”

“You have a point.”

“You go out drinking all the time with girls from the office, don’t you? So why the hell are you pissed at *me*?”

“I’m not pissed at you.”

“Then does that mean you just don’t trust me?”

At this rebuttal, Kirishima’s eyes widened a hair, gaze wavering, and the next words from his mouth were spoken as an evasive excuse. “I never…said I didn’t trust you…”

“It’s just the same as if you did, though! When it comes to you, I…” He swallowed the half-voiced words—he didn’t want to voice his feelings right now, not with this timing, and he fought back the urge to unleash all of his frustrations and irritation.

No matter how much the guy tossed him around or how his life became disturbed for it—he trusted Kirishima *because* he was Kirishima. And yet for all that, now he was met with distrust?

Facing each other like this, it was frightening how strongly Yokozawa feared he might say something he didn’t truly believe. He stood in place and turned to put his back to Kirishima.

“Yokozawa.”

“Don’t touch me…” He slapped away the hand that had come to rest on his shoulder—only to find himself next met with a strong grip as he was forcibly turned around. He opened his mouth to protest the abrupt action, but instead swallowed thickly at the piercing gaze he was met with.

Seizing the moment, Kirishima snapped a hand out and grabbed his lapels, tugging him forward. The uncharacteristic roughness brought their teeth clattering together, and Yokozawa could only gape wide-eyed at the devouring kiss forced upon him.

All thought processes ground to a halt at the sudden assault, but when a tongue thrust its way roughly into his mouth, he snapped back to his senses.

Their tongues brushing together drew a series of throbbing shudders, but Yokozawa's anger won out over anything else. Irritated that the guy seemed intent on simply shutting him up with a kiss, he bit down hard on Kirishima's lip and shoved him away.

"Cut it out!"

"…!" Kirishima wiped away the blood oozing from his lip with the back of his hand, staring at the ground and leaving Yokozawa unable to tell just what his expression was.

Yokozawa could taste iron in his own mouth. "…Leave." The danger latent in the voice he all but had to wring from his throat surprised even Yokozawa himself. "I said *get the hell out of here*." He raised his voice at Kirishima, who stood there in silence, and turned his back again.

If he let Kirishima leave right now—he would regret it, without a doubt. But despite that conviction, he couldn't bring himself to take back his words.

After a too-lengthy stretch of silence, Kirishima spoke up quietly. "…All right. I'll leave for today. I'll look after Sorata, too, so…don't worry about that."

All the fierceness he'd shown in their kiss had completely dissipated, making Yokozawa wonder what the hell that had been and leaving him even more distraught and confused at Kirishima's wavering attitude.

At length, he caught the sound of faltering footsteps fading away, followed by the sound of the door to the *genkan* opening, then closing.

…He'd done it again. The moment he found himself alone, all of the regret came crashing down upon him. Why—*why* couldn't he ever manage to say how he felt?

"I'm not a fucking teenager…"

Quite the contrary—a kid probably would've been better able to express himself. As you matured, maintenance of vanity and conscience towards appearance became

more and more important, until it was hard to tell what was and was not your true feelings.

He hadn't wanted to fight—he just wanted the guy to *understand*. But then…maybe that had been the hardest thing to ask for.

"…*Dammit*." He let out a short curse and gripped his hands into tight fists, digging his nails into his palms.

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"Shit…is my stomach *still* not better yet…?"

Yokozawa stalked up the hill toward the office, rubbing his stomach which was throbbing with pain. It had been cloudy all morning, providing welcome relief from the piercing rays of sunlight they'd had to bear for days on end, but the humidity made up for it by shooting up, leaving the air feeling like it was stuck to his skin.

He and Kirishima had been in 'cold war mode' since the previous Friday, with the anxiety and awkwardness keeping Yokozawa well at bay and away from Kirishima's apartment. It was a small fortune in the midst of everything that Hiyori was spending some time with her maternal grandparents right now. He didn't want her to see them fighting, nor did he want to have only superficial conversations. He'd toyed with the idea of picking up Sorata and bringing him home, but that would still require he go to Kirishima's place. He eventually deemed that it would be less stressful for Sorata to stay there than for him to be with Yokozawa and his irritated self.

He'd been royally pissed off at the selfish things Kirishima had said that evening—but now that he'd had some time to calm down and tried putting himself in Kirishima's shoes, he was able to understand a little how Kirishima had been feeling at the time.

Yokozawa himself had been irritated whenever he'd seen Kirishima going off drinking with female coworkers, and equally pissed at the way Kirishima brushed it off with the assurance that no one would ever get really serious over a single father. Regardless of the outcome—any lover would naturally wish for their partner to be more careful with how they comported themselves.

Looking at oneself from an objective perspective was difficult for anyone—and it was only natural to get pissed off if someone didn't listen to your warning. Kirishima

probably saw Yokozawa as a danger—the differences in their ages probably led to a huge difference in life experience. Still—he desperately wanted the guy to just *trust him*.

And that…would require a serious discussion. The more time that passed, the more distance grew between them, and that frightened Yokozawa. And yet—he still couldn't bring himself to take that first step.

"God this is throwing me off my game…"

He always turned into a complete and utter coward in the face of the person he loved—which just showed how very strongly he was drawn to Kirishima.

Maybe it was just like Kirishima had accused: that he was predisposed to be dependent on others. The more someone needed him, the more strongly he was drawn to them, and even though he was utterly unable to honestly accept those proffered affections, he still sought them desperately and was comforted by them.

But his feelings when it came to Kirishima were more than that—he never would have expected to reach this age and experience a quickening of his heartbeat he'd never felt before or feel so exhilarated. All of his previous romances had been nothing but pain; feelings of possession and hostility growing within him and eventually depriving him of any composure.

It had been fun, being with *him*—but maybe that had mostly been due to their close friendship. Now, as if a demon had been exorcised, he finally found himself able to calmly assess his surroundings. Maybe that 'love'…had always been doomed to fail.

"Oh, Yokozawa-san! We—welcome back!"

"…What's with you lot and those weird expressions?"

As soon as they saw Yokozawa's face, the expressions on the employees who'd been standing near the entrance to the building grew strange. When he stepped inside, the girls at reception threw cautious glances his way.

This…felt *very* familiar. Without a doubt, it meant that there was a distasteful rumor being passed around about him. God he hoped it wasn't too terrible…

He should probably take some stomach medicine once he reached his desk. With a sigh, he lined up to wait for the elevator and caught the conversation of the editors standing in front of him.

“Did you hear? Apparently Yokozawa-san was caught walking alone with a woman! Seems he went home with a part-timer working for a bookstore!”

“Seriously?! If she’s a part-timer, then that’d make her a college student probably, right? Man, sales people are so lucky, getting to have encounters like that…”

At their inquisitive expressions, Yokozawa was struck with another wave of *deja vu*, and deepening the furrow between his brows, he continued to quietly listen to their conversation.

“Yeah yeah—she’s a college student! And apparently *really* cute, too. Yokozawa-san comes off really straight-laced, but you can’t underestimate him, huh!”

He’d initially thought it ridiculous to engage them, but if he didn’t clear up this misunderstanding right now, even more rumors would likely start up.

“I didn’t go home with her. We just had a drinking party to recognize their help with an autograph event. Our homes only happened to be in the same direction by coincidence.”

“Eek—Yokozawa-san!!” The two paled as they whipped around to face him.

He cast a cool, calculating gaze between them and asked, “Any other questions?”

“Nope, we’re good! Oh—I just remembered I wanted to take the stairs today! I’ve been getting a little soft around the middle lately, after all.”

“Oh—th-then I’ll go with you! I’m getting kinda pudgy myself!”

With forced laughter, they both turned and headed in the opposite direction. “Hey—the elevator’s here now!”

“By all means then, take it yourself!” They jogged off, flustered, in the direction of the stairs. He couldn’t believe they had the balls to converse about something they’d be embarrassed for the subject to overhear *in the office* of all places.

But if he went out of his way to make excuses, that would only prompt even *more* rumors. It seemed he had no choice but to wait for the excitement to die down. "…Dammit, where's the leak?"

Even if someone *had* seen him walking with Matsumoto, it was illogical that anyone would be able to divine her background just from that; which meant that someone had spilled her details. And there were only two possible suspects in the entire company who could be responsible.

He took the elevator up to the sales floor and headed for his desk, when one of the suspects called out to him unconcernedly, "Ah~ Yokozawa-san! Someone's the subject of a lot of gossip this morning~"

"Come with me."

"Eh? Huh?" It pissed Yokozawa off even more that the guy seemed so genuinely perplexed. Dragging Henmi into the kitchenette area, Yokozawa proceeded to interrogate the thoroughly frightened man.

"What did you say?"

"Wha—what do you mean, 'what'?"

His voice deepened at the clearly confused Henmi. "Don't play stupid when you know *fully* well what I'm talking about—are you the one who started that damn rumor?"

"Of course not! I would never do anything like that!!"

He didn't miss the way Henmi's expression stiffened for just a moment, and he hardened his glare and pressed, "Are you *sure*?"

"I'm sure! Just…when some of the girls from the editing department asked who you'd gone home with, I told them it was a girl who worked at *Books Marimo* and—OWW!" Before Henmi could finish speaking, Yokozawa dropped a fist onto his head. While he may not have started the rumor, it was clear if he'd mentioned it to just one person, it would spread throughout the entire company.

"So you *are* the leak… Shit, you've *really* done a number on me here…"

"All I did was tell the truth!"

Yokozawa turned his cold gaze to Henmi, rubbing his head and still trying to excuse his actions. “Can you honestly tell me you weren’t at least a little curious yourself?”

“Geh, well…” Given the way his eyes were dancing about, he likely couldn’t entirely refute Yokozawa’s accusation. He was actually quite fond of Henmi’s utter inability to easily lie, but at times like this, his irritation with the guy won out over his admiration.

“One of these days—I’m going to e-mail the *entire company* one of your deepest, darkest secrets.”

“Hey—wait, don’t do that! You’re—you’re joking, right?”

“Who knows.” Of course he was joking, but he let the guy think he was just saying so for revenge. He knew it was a rather childish response, but he could probably get away with this much at least.

“Wha—what do you mean my ‘deepest, darkest secret’?!”

“If I told you, it’d lose all meaning.” In truth, he knew no such secret of Henmi’s—but everyone had at least one or two things they didn’t want anyone else to know about. If you told someone you knew their secret—they’d surely be able to think of what that might be.

It was probably Kirishima’s influence that had him pulling pranks like this lately on Henmi. Maybe the guy was starting to rub off on him from spending so much time together.

Leaving Henmi behind, cradling his head in the kitchenette, he headed back to his desk—when he ran into his superior leaving a meeting and looking quite distraught. ”What’s wrong? It’s still quite early for you to be back, isn’t it?” It was a full half hour before the meeting was scheduled to end as indicated on the scheduling board. Usually these things went *over* time, so something must have happened.

“No, we’re stumped. I don’t really get why myself, but Kirishima’s in a rather foul mood today. You’ve been pretty close with him lately, haven’t you? You know anything about this?”

He shuddered at Kirishima's name being tossed into the conversation so casually. "Oh uh, no. No clue." Actually, he had one *hell* of a clue, but there was no way he could spill that it was 'probably because he's fighting with me'.

Still, for Kirishima to be in such a bad mood that even those around him were starting to notice—that was a big deal, and was likely why his superior had been so shocked by the display.

"He seems really on-edge; now I've got a stomachache from feeling like I had to walk on eggshells around the guy. You had some medicine in your desk, didn't you? Mind if I get some from you?"

"Oh, not at all." He pulled out a drawer and passed over the packet of stomach medicine he kept on hand. While he was at it, he dropped a dosing packet for himself into his pocket, making a mental note to take it later. "So how did the meeting go in the end? You were supposed to bring up that proposal in today's meeting, weren't you?"

"Oh—that went perfectly fine. Actually—we were able to wrap things up much more quickly than usual. Seemed like everyone was in a, 'let sleeping dogs lie' mood, and no one raised a fuss about it."

"Ah, so that's why the meeting ended so early." It was great that the agenda item had passed, but he couldn't stop worrying about Kirishima's attitude. It was highly likely that his foul mood stemmed from his anger and frustration with Yokozawa, and the sense of responsibility made his chest hurt.

"What's the matter? You look quite serious…" Henmi asked concernedly, having just arrived after him. It was as if his flustered demonstration from before had never even happened. Yokozawa couldn't help being jealous of the guy's ability to so easily switch gears.

"Seems like that measure passed successfully in the meeting."

"Seriously?! That's great! But then—why do you look like that?"

"Don't ask *me*…" He didn't have it in him to explain just now and took off for the kitchenette again. Bringing up Kirishima now would just dig his grave even deeper.

“I’m gonna go take some medicine as well,” their superior added, slouching forward slightly as he rubbed his stomach and left the room. It must’ve been a really tense meeting.

“Geez, what’s going on with everyone?!” Henmi voiced his displeasure fretfully, finding himself left all alone.

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“Damn he’s late…”

He’d passed the time waiting by playing with Sorata, who had completely settled into his new living arrangements, but even now, past 10 o’clock, Kirishima still wasn’t home.

They *had* to have a serious discussion today. Yokozawa had steeled himself and headed straight to Kirishima’s apartment after work had ended, as he hadn’t been able to track the guy down at the office. He’d poked his head into the editing department a few times, trying to find the proper timing for them to have a conversation, but unable to bring himself to barge in on Kirishima when he seemed to busy, he’d eventually given up.

He’d tried to convince himself the timing was just off, but if he’d really wanted to call the guy out, he knew he could have. No matter how busy he seemed, even Kirishima had to take breaks once in a while, and he could’ve invited him out for dinner if he’d wanted.

What held him back…was the fear that they’d wind up going at each other’s throats again like before. He knew full well how low the boiling point of his emotions was—and when it came to Kirishima in particular, he lost his ability to listen to reason.

The first thing they needed to talk about…was probably what had happened on Friday. There was a high probability that the juicy gossip Henmi had carelessly leaked had found its way into Kirishima’s ears. If he had the wrong idea—Yokozawa would clear that up…and confess what he and Matsumoto had been talking about that evening.

He’d prepared the flow of conversation in his head, as if drafting a presentation for a meeting, ensuring everything was to go as efficiently as possible, but he couldn’t accurately predict Kirishima’s own thoughts, and it was throwing a wrench into the works. If he just looked at the situation from an objective perspective, he should be

able to think of *something*—but despite continuing to tell himself this, it just wasn't that easy.

There were sides of Kirishima that Yokozawa didn't know, and he had no clue just how pissed the guy was, actually. Maybe he would be tired from work and wouldn't want to have any annoying discussions. Maybe they should wait until things had cooled off a bit more.

But the more Yokozawa thought about it, the more confusing the whole situation became.

"You haven't heard anything about his schedule, have you?" He really must've been stressed out if he was sitting here asking questions to someone he knew couldn't give an answer. After staring up at Yokozawa for a few long moments, Sorata jumped over to his little cushion and curled up to settle down.

When Hiyori was around, no matter how busy he'd been, Kirishima had always made sure to return by a certain time—but today he had no particular reason to rush back. Maybe he planned to pull an all-nighter, even. Yokozawa had thought about making him dinner, but if Kirishima had eaten out, the ingredients would've been wasted. Not feeling much like making a meal for one, he'd settled in and dazedly watched some television, but he hadn't been able to follow the plot of the suspense drama he'd started watching halfway through and none of the characters had left much of an impression on him. Picking up the remote, he flipped the channel to a news station.

As the announcer reminded viewers that it was now 11 PM, Yokozawa let out a soft sigh. "…Guess I'll head home."

After waiting all this time, he slowly stood in place. It would be too much to ask Kirishima, exhausted when he finally returned home this late, to make time for the two of them to talk. He could still make the train if he left now—and besides, he couldn't calm down enough to bring himself to spend the night in a house without its proper owner around.

"Sorry, Sorata. I'm headed home for today. You gonna be okay by yourself?"

Sorata raised his head at being addressed, but then closed his eyes again, looking tired. He was probably a lot more comfortable here than when he'd been living with Yokozawa.

"…Yeah, you look just fine," he returned with a bitter laugh at the way the cat always took things at his own pace, and picked up his briefcase from the coffee table.

His deliberately slow pace with preparing to leave…was because he still held out hope that Kirishima would show up here at the last minute. Even if they couldn't have a proper discussion—he still wanted to at least *see* him.

But they didn't run into each other in the *genkan*, nor in the hall, nor on the elevator. As he stepped outside of the complex, he turned back and raised his gaze to Kirishima's room, then scratching at the back of his head, he set off for the station—when a cold drop of something fell onto his cheek.

"Rain…?"

He thought it had been his imagination for a moment, when another drop landed on the palm he'd extended and turned upwards and a warm southern wind wrapped around him. They'd said on the news that it was supposed to start storming on the morrow, but it seemed the rainclouds hadn't been able to wait until dawn.

"…Just my shitty luck, huh."

Why did it have to start raining *now* of all times? He wanted to take the issue up with the sky, but it would've been futile. He could've gone back for an umbrella, he reasoned, but he just couldn't bring himself to go back to that apartment right now. It would probably only lightly sprinkle for a while yet, so if he made a break for it, he could get home before it really started to pour.

"Can't be helped…" he muttered to himself, and scuffing his shoe over the asphalt before it grew wet enough to change color.

It always seemed to rain on days he felt like crap—probably karma at work—and with that thought in the back of his mind, he charged along the path toward the station.

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"Ah—*choo*!"

He'd hardly gotten a wink of sleep last night and had woken up early this morning as well; unable to go back to sleep and with nothing else to do, he'd made his way into the office.

Wanting to get a bit of work done before everyone else arrived, he made his arrangements and sat down before his computer—but his concentration was shot today, due in large part to the headache that had been attacking him intermittently since around dawn. He also felt a bit feverish, and the stomachache was still with him as well.

He knew fully well that these were all symptoms of a cold—he'd probably ruined his health when he'd gotten soaked in the downpour from the previous evening. Everything had been just fine from the run from Kirishima's apartment to the station and from there all the way to his own station; at that point, the storm hadn't quite reached where he was yet. The clouds had looked menacing, to be sure, but deeming it not enough to merit buying an umbrella, he'd started for his apartment.

He'd realized the decision had been a mistake about when he'd made half the journey home; the rain had suddenly escalated into heavy drops and then in a flash changed to a downpour of upturned-bucket proportions. With horrible timing, he'd already passed up the last convenience store. No other stores were still open, and even if he'd opted to wait out the storm, there was no telling when it would stop. Having no other choice, he'd charged home while soaking wet, looking like a drowned rat by the time he reached his building.

This was probably because of how chilled he'd let himself get back then. He'd hopped right into a warm shower, but in hindsight he probably should've opted for a soak in a tub.

Just in case, he'd taken some non-drowsy cold medicine earlier, but at this point he couldn't tell if it was working or not.

"…Maybe I'll have some coffee." He knew it wasn't good to try and ward this cold off using caffeine, but he couldn't help himself. Coffee probably wasn't the best idea with his stomach in the painful state it was already, but he *needed* something to flip that switch within him and get him started. Though while he preferred his coffee black, he at least allowed a bit of milk to cut it this morning.

When he returned to his desk with the lidded paper cup in his hand, Henmi had just arrived at the office. "Good morning, Yokozawa-san!"

"Yeah, mornin'."

He knew Henmi had been out drinking with co-workers the previous evening, but he didn't show an ounce of fatigue, and his complexion was decent. Begrudging Henmi's youth and vitality, he settled the coffee cup on his desk.

"That was quite the storm last night, huh! I left home that morning with my clothes still out drying on the line—it was horrible! If I'd known it would start raining *then*, I would've headed straight home and not gone out drinking."

"Yeah…that's nice…" Yokozawa let the banal chatter flow in one ear and out the other, and at his half-hearted reply, he was swiftly reminded of the gravity of the damage done.

"It's not 'nice' at all! Now I have to wash my clothes all over again!"

Yokozawa couldn't have honestly cared less about Henmi's clothes, seeing as he himself had suffered bodily damage. That at least was a hell of a lot better than ruining your health. And while it had been his own fault for underestimating the weather and not buying an umbrella on his way home, he still couldn't bring himself to sympathize all that much with Henmi's plight.

"Wait—you do laundry on weekdays? You're actually pretty hard-working huh…"

"I actually quite like cleaning and laundry. It's kind of…a stress-relief for me, I guess? Do you not do much housework, Yokozawa-san?"

"Only when I have to. Though I guess I don't mind cooking."

"Oh right—don't you cook with Hiyori-chan over at Kirishima-san's place sometimes? Invite me over sometime!"

"Yeah, sure. One of these days."

"EH?"

At this vague, random reply, Yokozawa received in return an expression that looked as if Henmi had just seen a ghost. The unexpectedly shocked reaction had Yokozawa in turn hesitantly replying, "Wh…what's with that expression?"

"Well—usually you're all *'I don't have any food fit to give you!'* or something! What's with you today? Don't tell me you have a fever…?!"

“Of course I don’t—I just responded randomly is all.” The unexpected display of concern led his true feelings to slip out a hair.

“Hey—isn’t that a little *mean*?”

“I’m not telling you you can’t have any, *am I*? Just, if there’s a chance, maybe.”

“I’m holding you to that!”

“Yeah yeah; hey, isn’t the air conditioning a little strong today?” A shiver rippled down his spine at the cool air blasting over him. The thermostat was usually set rather high to conserve energy and he typically found himself wishing it were cooler, but today it was actually a little *cold*.

“You think? It feels as hot as ever to me; are you sure you aren’t looking a bit rough?”

“‘S your imagination.” He’d tried to force a nonchalant expression, not wanting Henmi worrying too much over him, but Henmi saw right through him. While surprised at how sharp Henmi could be in the strangest of respects, he tried not to let it show. He couldn’t have his subordinates fussing over him.

“No—something is definitely off with you today! You don’t have your usual…*intensity*.”

“What the hell’s *that* supposed to mean? Fine, sure—maybe I’ve got a little heatstroke; I’m not as young as you, after all.”

“You’re only three years my elder!”

“And those three years mean a hell of a lot; I’ll make sure to eat something energy-packed for lunch. But forget about me—how’s that proposal from the other day coming?” He changed the subject with a vague smile; much more of this cross-examination and he’d start to show cracks.

“Oh—it’ll take a bit longer. I haven’t been able to get all the data compiled yet…”

“Well—just show me everything you’ve got now.”

“All right then—I’ll send you an e-mail.” Henmi flitted back off to his own desk and started up his computer. Relieved that he seemed to have thrown the guy off his trail for now, Yokozawa flipped over to work-mode in his own head.

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“Please stop here,” he directed the taxi driver and pulled out his wallet. After paying the fare, he started for his apartment on unsteady feet. Without the will to even bother checking his mailbox, he piled into the elevator and somehow managed to make it all the way to his own room, where his stamina gave out on him at the entrance and he was forced to lean against the wall for a few moments.

He’d pushed himself too hard today, and the virus had finally won out over him. Maybe the way his stomach had been paining him since last Friday’s drinking excursion had been the first sign that his body was weak. This recent heatwave had sapped his strength, leaving him defenseless.

“Shit, I’m dizzy…”

He’d managed to hold out while he was at the office, but the moment he’d stepped outside, the urge to vomit had assaulted him. If he’d let himself collapse right then and there, though, there was no telling what sorts of rumors would be flying around the next day, so he’d slapped on a nonchalant expression with sheer strength of will until he could catch a taxi near the train station.

Clinging to the wall, he entered his apartment and headed for the kitchen. He needed to eat something before he tried to take any medicine; he had no appetite, but he downed a gelatin pack and a gelatin herbal capsule he’d bought earlier that afternoon.

He didn’t even have enough strength to give his sweat-soaked body a rinse in the shower, and he sluggishly changed into his pajamas and climbed into the bed.

“This never used to happen before…” he muttered, pulling a thermometer from the drawer of his bedside table and taking his temperature. He’d never had to worry about ruining his health just by overdoing things a bit when he was a child.

At the shrill beeping, he pulled the device from his armpit and checked the reading—and when he saw the value was well past 38 degrees, he felt his fever rise even more. He felt a pang of regret that he probably should’ve gone straight to the

hospital, but it was too late for that now. If he wasn't on the road to recovery after a good night's rest, he could always call a taxi.

He didn't want to admit it, but he felt like his stamina had taken a dive of late. His hangovers seemed to last longer than they had before as well, so maybe he was just reaching an age where he needed to start thinking about the pace of his life—before it was too late.

He still had a few good years left on him, to be sure, but he couldn't overexert himself like he could in his teens.

"…Shit, I didn't get to talk to him today either…"

He'd honestly meant to talk to Kirishima today, but with his condition being so bad, it hadn't been possible. He once again cursed his horrible timing.

They had neither texted nor spoken to one another for four days now—and it figured that now of all times there were no meetings that forced them together at least.

But…Yokozawa honestly wasn't confident he could stand before Kirishima without all of his agitation and anxiety showing clearly on his face—so maybe this was actually all for the best.

"I have…to go see him tomorrow…"

He didn't want this awkward atmosphere between them to continue. It was ruining his spirit—and more than that, he *missed* the guy. Maybe being sick was making him all the more desperate for human companionship, but every time he closed his eyes, all he saw was Kirishima's face.

The medicine seemed to be kicking in, and he could feel his consciousness slipping away. He recalled distantly that he'd forgotten to turn the lights off in the living room, but he didn't have the energy left to get up anymore.

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He could sense someone was nearby. Thinking for a moment that he needed to feed Sorata, he remembered distantly that the cat was at Kirishima's place right now, his fuzzy mind not working well.

They liked to say that sickness turned you timid, but Yokozawa felt that it was pretty appropriate to describe how he felt right now. Even if he could hardly rely on Sorata, the mere presence or absence of a cat had distinctly different effects on his level of anxiety.

But if that wasn't Sorata he was sensing, then who…?

Kirishima's face immediately floated into his mind's eye, but that was hardly likely. His parents hardly ever visited, though…and there was only one friend who had a key to his apartment.

Thinking that perhaps it was *him*, he called out, "…Masamune?"

"Sorry, I'm not Takano."

"Huh…?" He jolted at the unexpected voice that drifted in from the living room, and after a few moments, his consciousness returned fully.

"How're you feeling? It's gotta be pretty bad to put you in bed like this…"

"Kirishima-san…?"

"Bingo," he returned with a bitter smile and laid something cool across Yokozawa's forehead—probably an antifebrile cooling sheet. The chilled sensation against his feverish, flushed body was amazing.

"What're you doing here…?" He panicked for a moment that perhaps this was just a hallucination induced by his high fever and took several long blinks.

At this reaction, Kirishima forced a sigh. "When I went down to the sales floor, I found out you'd left early—which is pretty rare—and Henmi mentioned you'd looked kind of pale, so I got worried and came to check on you. You had the lights on, but you wouldn't answer the door no matter how many times I rang, so I freaked out and thought maybe you'd keeled over."

"I was sleeping; not like I could help it." He hadn't heard the doorbell at all. The cold medicine he'd taken before climbing into bed had done its job and he'd slept like the dead.

"Well that's why I came in on my own. Aren't you glad you gave me that spare key now?"

“You took that without my permission, asshole…” When he fired back his usual abusive retort, Kirishima’s smile turned a bit more enjoyable. It felt like it’d been ages since he’d seen that smile, and he felt the emotions that had been on tenterhooks within him finally relax. He didn’t let it show in his face, but it struck him strongly in the chest.

“If you weren’t feeling well, you should’ve called me—what’s the harm in relying on me at times like this? Though—I guess I can understand why you might’ve not wanted to… But what if something had happened?”

“…Sorry…” He’d been a bit over-confident thinking he’d get better if he just took some medicine and slept it off, but there’d also been a part of him that hadn’t been entirely sure this was something he should be selfish with.

“You’re supposed to be selfish with others when you’re sick, you know. You thirsty? I bought some sports drink.”

“I’ll have some.” He pushed himself up into a seated position and brought the proffered bottle to his lips. Thirstier than he’d even expected, he downed the whole bottle at once.

“Are you hungry?”

“No appetite…” He felt like if he tried to eat anything solid, the urge to vomit, which had finally eased, would come back.

“Well if you’re going to take some medicine, you’ll have to put something in your stomach. Oh yeah—I brought some apples; want me to cut up a few for you? I always do it for Hiyo when she’s got a fever.”

“I thought you couldn’t peel apples?”

“What’re you talking about? You can cut an apple just fine without peeling it. Don’t worry—I’ll wash it well.”

“…I’ll pass. I already took some medicine before I went to sleep.”

“Then you should go back to sleep. Oh—but change into something else before you do. You’ll get chilled with those sweat-soaked clothes. Where do you keep your sleep clothes?”

Without a doubt, this had to be nothing more than a pleasant dream. Kirishima here, in his house, nursing him at his bedside? It was a laughable situation. Maybe he was just weak, being tossed about by his fever.

"…In the middle of the closet drawer." He typically would've protested that he could do it himself, but when he considered that this was just a dream, he obediently let himself be a bit selfish.

He changed into the room wear Kirishima pulled out for him and climbed back into bed, where Kirishima settled at his bedside and pulled the thermometer from his bedside table.

"Check your temperature."

"'Kay…" He tucked the thermometer under his arm and settled his head back against his pillow. Maybe because Kirishima was sitting next to him, it seemed to take longer than usual for the measurement. Feverish and addled though he might have been, he couldn't deny how awkward the situation felt. It would be difficult to even feign sleep with as worked-up as he felt right now.

He stared at the long line of Kirishima's back; given that he was facing the door right now, Yokozawa couldn't tell what his expression looked like.

"I'm sorry…for the other day."

Yokozawa started at having conversation suddenly directed at himself and let out an idiotic response. "Huh?"

"You know full well what I'm talking about; Friday evening, I mean."

"……." Yokozawa clammed up, completely at a loss as to how to respond to Kirishima when he turned back his way. The silence continued for a few long moments, ultimately broken by the beeping of the thermometer.

"Let me see… 37.5, huh. Still a little high."

"Better than before, at least."

"The fatigue's been building up in you, hasn't it? It's been sweltering lately, and you love overexerting yourself. Don't you get tired making the rounds?"

“Not really; it’s part of my job.” In fact, from Yokozawa’s point of view, it was worse being stuck behind a desk all day. But the difference in temperature between inside and outside seemed to have caused more damage than he’d been aware of.

“I guess; but it just means you’ve gotta take better care of yourself. Brace yourself, rest up, and get back your strength.”

Kirishima reached forward and ruffled his hair, and Yokozawa weakly slapped his hand away. “…Oi, I said *cut that out*.” Truthfully, he didn’t dislike it at all; it was only that he was too embarrassed to admit how amazingly good it felt, the sensation of those fingers.

“With that kind of energy to you, I’m sure that fever will go down soon.” Yokozawa turned his face away to escape the gentle gaze Kirishima directed toward him. The slight quickening of his pulse was due, undoubtedly, to his fever.

He ordered his heart to calm down, when Kirishima started talking again. “About that night… I just wound up in front of your apartment without even realizing it. I wasn’t drunk, you know. Just—when I couldn’t get through to your phone, I panicked and kind of…”

“Panicked?”

“Anyways—I didn’t mean to blame you for anything. Though I guess I can see how it would’ve been difficult for you to just tell me to trust you…” Seeming to realize that he was coming off as trying to excuse what he’d done, Kirishima scratched his head awkwardly—but that wasn’t what Yokozawa was concerned with at the moment.

“So you’re…not mad at me?”

“Why would you think I was mad at you?” His expression was confused.

“I just…thought maybe you were pissed that I didn’t listen to your warning… Was I wrong?”

Because he hadn’t heeded Kirishima’s warning, the very thing he’d been warning against had happened—he’d assumed the guy had been disgusted over it. But at Yokozawa’s hesitant confession, Kirishima simply chuckled bitterly.

“You idiot. I was just…sulking.”

“Huh?”

“Like I said—I was jealous of that chick and irritated for it. I spouted all that self-important shit, and look where it got me.”

Kirishima quickly turned away, abashed, and Yokozawa found himself unable to keep from laughing at the utterly childish gesture. “Geez, are you a kid? Though huh, so even *you* sulk sometimes…”

“Don’t *laugh*.” But this just made the laughs come all the more.

After letting his shoulders shake for a bit, Yokozawa finally let loose, face serious, what he’d been meaning to confess for some time now. “There’s seriously nothing between me and that girl. When she asked me if I had a lover—I told her that I did. She never even confessed to me.”

In the low light of the room, he could clearly see how shocked Kirishima was. “…When?”

“Last Friday. Just before you called me.” It was the entire reason he’d been so shaken when he’d gotten the call at just that moment. But the clear displeasure in Kirishima’s voice had made him feel as if he were being doubted, so he’d snapped.

If he’d tried to call back after he and Matsumoto had parted ways, things likely wouldn’t have gotten this bad. Looking back now, he knew he’d behaved quite childishly.

“So in other words…I was a *complete* idiot? Ugh, what the hell! Dammit! Tell me these kinds of things sooner!” Kirishima cursed as he mussed his own hair. He was probably regretting what he’d said back then right about now.

They’d felt the whole thing had been a serious problem between them, but in hindsight, it was really little more than a lovers’ tiff. Once all was settled, it was something they could actually laugh about.

“Still…to think that *you* actually get jealous…”

"Of course I do—we're talking about the guy I love here. I even got all pumped up to go into battle against her at the autograph event and everything—but you didn't even notice."

"Pumped up…?"

So *that* had been why he'd seemed particularly decked out that day. Maybe the timing of Hiyori barging in had also been his doing…

As Yokozawa sat there, shocked at how unexpectedly narrow-minded Kirishima had been, Kirishima apologized shamefully, "I'm…really sorry for acting so childish."

"Hmph, so you recognized it, did you?"

"I guess. You might not have realized it—but I'm a hell of a lot more possessive and prone to jealousy than you."

"I'm beginning to get that impression." He just happened to be particularly good at keeping up appearances—that was what Kirishima had told him once before. Which meant in this case, he'd been so agitated by the situation that he hadn't been able to pretend.

"Still…you actually *told* her…"

"If she'd just brought it up in passing that would've been one thing—but when she asked me outright, I didn't exactly have any choice *but* to respond. And I never once mentioned your name."

"And…was that all you told her?"

"…That was it."

"What was that pause?"

"*Nothing*."

He hadn't mentioned everything he'd said only because it was too damn embarrassing.

*…Someone I greatly respect.*

If Kirishima found out Yokozawa had said something like that, there was no doubt he would've teased Yokozawa about it mercilessly. Even for a dream, he couldn't bring himself to be *that* open.

Perhaps worried when Yokozawa grew unnaturally silent, Kirishima hesitantly questioned, "So…completely disenchanted with me now?"

"Nah… I won't say it wasn't unexpected, but…"

Kirishima's expression turned suspicious when Yokozawa trailed off. "What's that 'but' for?"

After a moment's mental debate, Yokozawa simply spoke the words within his mind as they came. "Was just thinking that we really…kind of suit each other." He was only able to laugh this easily because this was a dream.

Kirishima's expression showed how surprised he'd been by the moment, but after a momentary choked up gleam to his eye, he chuckled, "I guess we do at that…"

He hesitantly squeezed the fingers casually looped around his own, and maybe it was just because of his fever, but Kirishima's hands were cool and felt wonderful against him.

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As if rising to the water's surface from the seabed to which he'd sunk, Yokozawa slowly roused to consciousness, and as he woke, he found himself staring dazedly up at the ceiling.

It'd been a while since he'd slept so well. He usually found himself forcibly woken from a mud-like sleep, but today he awoke feeling remarkably refreshed.

"…I'm starving," he muttered to himself without realizing it and slowly eased himself upright. Did he even *have* anything in the kitchen to eat?

"I'll bet you are. Morning; how are you feeling?"

"Can't complain…wait, what? Why're you here?!" The guy had poked his head into Yokozawa's room as if it were his own, startling Yokozawa.

“What, lost your memories again? And after I nursed you through the night—ungrateful ass.”

“Eh…?” Yokozawa’s thought processes screeched to a halt at the comment invoking a sense of deja vu. The first time, he’d paled in shock—but this time, his face simply heated up with a flush.

All those things he’d said and done because he’d thought it was a dream—that had all been *real*. Even setting aside the whole ‘nursing back to health’ part, he’d said so many unbearably embarrassing things.

Kirishima chuckled at the obviously agitated Yokozawa. “Wait—don’t tell me you thought it was all a dream or something, right?”

“…!” He bit back a response, and Kirishima’s shoulders shook all the harder.

“Bullseye, huh? I *thought* you were being rather honest back there… So *that*‘s what it was, huh? Well, I’ve got it all filed away in my long-term memory so I guess I don’t mind either way.”

“Forget it! *Right. Now.*”

“No~t a chance, it’s too good to waste.”

At Kirishima’s response, Yokozawa massaged his forehead. The pain had lessened, but now *new* stress was plaguing him.

Still…when he thought about it, it was a little late to worry about Kirishima seeing him in an embarrassing state. Maybe being overly sensitive to it just gave your opponent more opportunities. In other words, if he could turn the tables on the guy—he wouldn’t have to be teased as much as he was.

Granted, he didn’t see himself being *that* bold any time soon, but at least *pretending* it was the first step.

“…Do whatever you want.” He rose from the bed and slipped past Kirishima, headed for the kitchen, where he filled a glass with water and downed it in one gulp.

“Now *that*‘s an unexpected response. You usually put up more of a fight than that.”

“Like I can put up with dealing with you on every little matter. And forget that—have you seriously been here the whole time?” He didn’t even have a couch that the guy could’ve napped on. While he did have an extra futon for guests, it was currently sitting way in the back of his closet, so the only real place anyone could’ve rested was the bed. Which meant Kirishima likely hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d professed to nursing Yokozawa through the whole night.

“Til around sunrise. I checked on you and then dropped back by my place for a few. Oh—I made sure to feed Sorata.”

“Sorry for the trouble—really,” he apologized anew.

“Who said it was any trouble?”

“…Thank you.”

When Yokozawa changed his phrasing, Kirishima turned on him a smile that seemed to say *good boy*. “You’re welcome.” He often wondered if he wasn’t on the same level as Hiyori in Kirishima’s eyes at times like this. Hell, maybe he was even lower on the totem pole.

“What time is it now?”

“Just past 2 PM.”

“Ah *dammit* we’re totally late!” He knew it wouldn’t do any good to panic, but he had to notify the office, and he picked up the handset on the desk in his bedroom. Would his boss even believe him if he told him he had been laid up in bed with a cold? When Yokozawa had never taken a single sick day since joining the company?

He’d more or less completely recovered now, but it would probably be best to just take the day off and rest rather than head in to work now. At least he didn’t have any appointments today with clients.

“Who’re you calling? Take-out?” Kirishima questioned curiously, staring at Yokozawa with the phone in his hand trying to think of what to tell his boss.

“Are you an idiot? I’m calling the office of course! And—hey, don’t *you* have to be in, too?” he snapped back, voicing the concern that suddenly came to mind. Kirishima being here meant he was skipping out on work as well. They both had a ton of paid

vacation days saved up, but neither of them had light enough workloads to use them so freely.

“I took the day off as well. They can handle things without me for a single day. And I made sure to call in sick for you while I was at it, so don’t worry.”

“Huh? Why the hell were *you* telling them that *I* was sick?”

“If I hadn’t, it would’ve been an unauthorized absence, wouldn’t it? When I told your boss, he said, ‘So I guess even demons get sick now and then’.”

“……” Yokozawa could only release a sigh at the nonchalantly returned response. It looked like there was no escaping becoming the topic of conversation around the office. There would be no choice but to regroup and turn the tables.

“Well, now that that’s all said and done—go take a bath. I’ll take care of the cooking.”

“*You*‘ll take care of the cooking?” He could hardly let that go unremarked, and raised his voice. What the hell was Kirishima—who was an utter failure in the kitchen—intending to make? Was it even a good idea to let the guy in the kitchen?

At Yokozawa’s obvious anxiety, Kirishima boasted, “Don’t make fun of me; I’m a parent, you know. I can make something simple like rice porridge.”

“You sure I can trust you…?”

“Just leave it to me.” The amount of confidence the guy had was, in itself, a little frightening. However, despite being unable to shake off the worry, he couldn’t fight his desire to wash off his sweat-soaked body.

“Well, don’t overdo it.”

“Yeah yeah—get going.” And thus with painful reluctance, Yokozawa headed for the bathroom.

With the sweat washed from his body, Yokozawa’s mind cleared as well. He changed into casual clothing and headed back into the living room, where it seemed the meal’s preparations were finished.

“You done?”

“Actually—I made it while you were still sleeping. Didn’t wanna mouth off about being able to do it and then screw it up, y’know?” The spread covering the table seemed to be a random assortment of dishes taken from the refrigerator. As he drew a chair up to the table, Kirishima scooped some rice porridge from a pot and passed it to him.

“This enough?”

“For now, sure.” He *was* hungry, but if it tasted awful, he might not be able to eat it all. He scooped up a spoonful of the porridge, steam billowing up, and stared—then he steeled himself.

“This…is actually pretty edible.” The porridge he’d warily brought to his mouth had a normal flavor, tasting neither pasty nor burnt. Even setting aside his empty stomach, it was more than edible.

“Right? Got my mother to teach me the recipe and practiced it. Hiyo used to get fevers a lot when she was younger, after all.”

“Ah, I see.”

Since he hadn’t had much of an appetite the previous day, this was his first proper meal in 24 hours. He scooped the bowl empty and went back for seconds, only stopping for breath after he’d finished his third bowl. He wasn’t full, but he understood it wasn’t a good idea to stuff himself while still on the road to recovery.

“Thanks for the meal.”

“You’re quite welcome.” As Yokzawa knocked back the last of his lukewarm tea, Kirishima added, “Take some more medicine. That cold’ll be back if you let your guard down thinking you’re all recovered.”

“Yeah yeah.” He carried his dishes to the sink and downed the medicine he’d left in the kitchen. Quickly rinsing off his dishes, he headed back into the living room, where Kirishima was drinking some tea.

“…You mind if I ask you something?”

“What?”

“You’ve been acting…really weird lately. What’s the problem?”

"!" Yokozawa gasped at the unexpected question. He'd certainly been hung up on something for a while now—but he'd tried his level best to keep Kirishima from noticing.

"You don't have to say if you don't want to—or well, that was what I was thinking, but I'm not a wizard, you know. You've got to tell me if there's something on your mind."

"……."

"*Yokozawa*."

He made up his mind when he heard his name called softly—if he ran away here, they'd never get through this. Sure, there was no guarantee that anything would change even if he spilled everything, but at least his heart would feel lighter than it did keeping it a secret locked within himself.

He settled down into his chair sideways and rested his elbow on the chair's back—he didn't have the balls to say this facing Kirishima straight-on. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he finally found the words he needed and spoke.

"I just…was wondering if you were…really okay. With me."

"…What do you mean?"

"Your place is really nice, and Hiyo's adorable. But…it's not really a place I'm meant to be, see?"

"…" Kirishima's breath seemed to catch—apparently he'd finally gathered what Yokozawa was trying to explain.

"Your wife, she…she's really beautiful, and I just feel like…I don't have anything in common with her."

Finally giving voice to the words, he grew abashed at how much he sounded like a fricking *teenage girl*—and now that he'd noticed it, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

The time he spent at Kirishima's place was relaxing and enjoyable—and maybe that was precisely what worried him so. Getting worked up over this sort of thing,

though, wasn't the most masculine of feats, and he prepared himself to be laughed at—but Kirishima just let out a soft sigh of understanding.

"…I get it now. And that's why you don't like us messing around at my place?"

"……." Any time Kirishima had tried to touch him, in that very same place where his wife's picture stood, feelings of guilt and shame had welled up instead, and he'd found himself placing distance between them. At first it had been unconscious, but once he'd realized it, his attitude had turned unnaturally awkward.

"Well, as for your first question: It has to be you, and no one else." He hadn't assumed that Kirishima was treating him as a replacement for anyone—he just wanted to know *why*, and at Yokozawa's patently displeased expression as he sat there silently listening, Kirishima muttered through a soft chuckle, "…I can see you're not satisfied with that response."

"……."

"Though I guess this time last year I hadn't expected I'd be dating you."

"Neither did I." If he'd told himself one year ago what he'd be doing right now, he never would've believed it. He either would've laughed it off or moodily reminded himself not to tell bad jokes.

"I've been paying attention to you for quite a while now, though."

"Huh?" At the offhand confession, Yokozawa unthinkingly turned to face Kirishima. This was the first he was hearing of this.

"I guess the first time I noticed you…was during a meeting. It was like, 'Wow, they sure brought in a real feisty newbie this time,' and I decided to keep you under observation."

"*Observation*?!" He doubted his hearing at the hardly romantic word, but he seemed to have heard correctly.

"You were really biting and sarcastic, but a lot more down-to-earth than you seemed, and you worked twice as hard as anyone else. Plus it was kind of funny, the way you flew off the handle any time someone goaded you."

“Fuck you—I’m asking you a serious question here!” Kirishima’s comments sounded far from sincere, and it was starting to piss him off that the guy wasn’t taking this seriously.

“And I’m giving you a serious answer. I guess I didn’t realize that I was in love with you, though, until I sat down next to you in that bar. It just…finally *clicked* why I’d always been interested in you.”

“Wha…” The frankly delivered words set Yokozawa’s face aflame. He was the one who’d demanded seriousness, but having Kirishima be so straightforward and honest like this was just…*embarrassing*. Then, with Yokozawa’s eyes still swimming, Kirishima dropped another bombshell.

“And actually…it wasn’t a coincidence, my going into that bar you happened to be at that night.”

“*What*?”

“I saw you go inside—and, I let it go at first, but it kept bugging me, and I wound up going back. Then *you* started talking to *me*.”

“Wa—wait wait wait, wait a minute—why the hell would you go out of your way to come *back*?!” It had been raining cats and dogs that night, a deluge great enough to make you think twice before even attempting to walk to the station. He couldn’t fathom why anyone in that situation would come *back*.

“I told you, didn’t I? That you’d piqued my interest. I guess if I *had* to give a reason, maybe I’d say that I just…had a *feeling* things would turn out this way.”

“……..”

“Kinda like destiny, right? I listened to you bitch and complain, and all it made me think was *this guy should just fall in love with me then*.”

“You…have *really* shitty taste.” Falling for a drunkard who coaxed him into having a drink together? It was nothing short of *stupid*, and Yokozawa added a curse to hide his embarrassment.

“Geez, you just can’t be honest, can you? You’re supposed to tell me *you sure know how to pick ‘em* at moments like this.”

“Idiot,” he spit out shortly. As if he’d ever be able to say something as shameless as that.

“So, what else do you want to know? I should probably tell you about Sakura, huh? I don’t guess we’ve ever really talked about her…”

He shuddered; it was the first time he’d ever heard her name from Kirishima’s lips. “…Yeah…” He nodded, all nerves, and repositioned himself—it would be rude to listen to someone talk about a dead loved one while facing away from them.

Kirishima’s gaze grew far away, and at length, he finally spoke. “We…were classmates in middle school. Same year. She was the class president, and I was the class clown—so at first, we kind of were at it like cats and dogs. She’d gripe at me for every little thing—I couldn’t *stand* how irritating she was.”

He supposed it was a given, but when Yokozawa considered that even Kirishima had been a child once, it left him feeling strange. He couldn’t imagine what sort of childhood the guy had had.

“I guess I started thinking about her as a woman, though, when I realized that she didn’t really have a strong constitution. She’d act all tough in front of everyone, and when I saw her swearing she’d rather die than have anyone see her be weak, it just…got to me. Maybe I’d always been interested in her on some level, but well—I was a boy in middle school.”

Yokozawa’s chest constricted at the gentle expression that blossomed over Kirishima’s features as he let himself get lost in memory. He didn’t quite know how to explain the feeling—not jealousy, something else entirely.

The look in his eyes as he stared down at his hands…it was the same one he turned to Hiyori from time to time; absolutely *overflowing* with love and affection.

“I think about it when I see Hiyo too, but—girls tend to mentally mature faster than boys, so even when we both realized we were interested in one another, I couldn’t bring myself to say anything to her, and when we got into the same high school, I kept throwing excuses at myself—and she wound up confessing to me first.”

“Sounds like she had a pretty manly character.” The woman in the picture had seemed to be all graceful beauty—but the image Kirishima painted for him with his words sounded more like a determined, unyielding young woman.

"Yup—I don't think I ever won a single fight with her. And that reminds me—she was the one who proposed to me, too; we got hitched as soon as we graduated college." With his easy manner of speaking and carefree attitude, Kirishima often came off as a playful sort—but he was remarkably single-minded. "Thinking back on it now…maybe she was in a hurry. As she got older, her strength had started to give out, and after she had Hiyori, it was a revolving door in and out of the hospital… She put up a hell of a fight, but…what can you do?"

"……."

Even at his age, Yokozawa still had no idea what you were supposed to say at moments like this. No matter how much he tried to sympathize, only those who'd been there, who'd experienced it, would ever really be able to understand how it felt—and he had no idea how painful it must have been to be parted by death from the partner you'd shared your life since middle school with.

"…I can kind of understand what you want to ask. You're thinking, *what if she were here now*, right?"

"……." Yokozawa, at a loss for words, raised his head at Kirishima's on-the-nose comment.

"Humans can't help wondering *what if*, after all. Hell, I can't tell you how many times I've wished I could just…go back in time. But—right now, all we *have* is the present."

Kirishima's words cut sharply into his chest. The guy must've spent countless nights agonizing over this all alone—his words held the weight of untold wishing and worrying until he could do no more.

"Now—I'm not denying the past I have. Even now, I still love Sakura, and I cherish all the memories I have with her. But—I don't have her by my side anymore. I can't change that reality, and *because* that's part of my past, I'm the person I am today… It's the same for you, right?"

"!" Yokozawa jolted when the question was turned on himself.

*You don't have to forget how you loved him before.*

Those words…maybe they'd been offered based on Kirishima's own experiences. Even now, he still couldn't tell what Kirishima's true intentions had been back then.

Continuing to love someone…and never forgetting that you used to love someone—they were so alike and yet so very different. Yokozawa was realizing that for the very first time.

"I've never, *never* thought of you as a replacement for her. And I've never thought that you had anything in common with her. Yeah…I guess if I had to suggest something you two shared…it'd be the fact that I just want to make you happy, really."

"—"

His chest tightened at Kirishima's confession, and as he struggled to fight back the emotions welling up within him, Kirishima spoke up in a different tone, "You know how…they ask you who you'd save if they were hanging from a cliff?"

"What's with that line all of a sudden?" At Yokozawa's confused expression, Kirishima waved him off, urging him to just listen.

"If I found myself in that situation…I'd save Hiyori. Without a second thought. But—then I'd stand there, waiting and trusting…that you'd pull yourself up by yourself."

The sly response drew a chuckle. "…That's a pretty convenient way of phrasing things." As he laughed, he casually dabbed his finger at the corner of his eyes, where tears had threatened to leak out.

"Then what about you? Would you save me?"

"Like you need *saving*." Kirishima's profession of *waiting and trusting* had torn away all of the worry and anxiety that had settled inside Yokozawa.

In Kirishima's example, he probably would've worked hand over fist to save Takano before he even got near the cliff's edge. He'd been far too overprotective, unable to shake those memories of that horrific period. Takano at his lowest had desperately needed someone supporting him—but now it was different. Not just that he was able to stand on his own now, but that he'd started *walking forward* on his own. The only one who'd been stuck, standing in the same place, had been Yokozawa himself.

And it was all thanks to Kirishima that he was finally able to look at himself from an objective perspective this way.

"I want to spend my life with you—from now on into the future. What about you?"

"I…"

He didn't want to just mouth off something half-assed, and as he thought for a moment, choosing his words carefully, Kirishima chuckled self-deprecatingly and offered wryly, "…So you really *do* prefer Takano, huh…"

"Huh?" Why had that name popped up now of all times?

At the confused response, Kirishima evasively clarified, "Just…don't you remember? You were calling for him yesterday…"

"Oh…" He recalled here that when he'd sensed someone nearby in his half-awake state, he'd called out Takano's name without thinking. Kirishima must've been bothered by it.

"I guess when it all comes down to it—he's the one you'll turn to, huh? Though I suppose you can't exactly rely on someone who can barely clean his own house—"

"That's not it!" he interrupted, refuting Kirishima's unfounded speculations in a panic. He hadn't *called* for Takano—he'd just unthinkingly blurted out the name of the only friend who came by his apartment with any frequency.

"Then what *is* it?"

At Kirishima's vaguely peevish pressing, Yokozawa fired back, abashed, "I just—didn't expect you to be there yesterday! I was the one who threw you out the other day, after all; I couldn't *call* for you!"

"You know you don't have to worry about that kind of thing with me."

"…I did kind of *hope* that you'd come, though." He hadn't wanted to admit such a shameful thing, but if he let this misunderstanding continue, they'd just wind up missing each other again.

"…Geez, say that sort of thing to my *face*."

"…!" Yokozawa's breath caught as their faces were brought close with a quick duck. His heart gave a great leap, and he could feel his pulse racing all the way in his fingertips. "You're—too damn *close*!"

"Feeling shy?"

"Hey—*cut it out!*" Unable to bring himself to meet Kirishima's gaze, Yokozawa glanced away.

He'd only realized it recently…but he *really* seemed to like the build of Kirishima's face. He couldn't count the number of times he'd caught himself getting lost in the way the guy looked with his eyes downturned as he read a book or magazine. Maybe he'd always had a thing for attractive people and never even noticed.

"C'mon, *look at me*," Kirishima whined, voicing his displeasure when Yokozawa kept his face turned away, unable to stand it. He leaned over the table and ducked his head to peek down and meet the averted gaze—at which point Yokozawa chose his moment and attacked.

"I said *cut it out*—!"

"?!"

He snapped one hand out and grabbed Kirishima's shirt collar, jerking him forward, and sealed their lips together. Kirishima gaped in wide-eyed shock at Yokozawa's goal having been so easily won.

"Just shut your trap for a little while," Yokozawa grunted his order, immediately releasing him. He'd been momentarily pleased that his revenge had panned out so well, but he immediately found himself regretting his actions.

"…Wow, you're pretty proactive today. Never would've expected *you* to seduce *me*…"

His voice quavered at the unexpected reaction. "*Sedu*—don't just read things however you like!"

"C'mon, no need to be shy~"

"You know—I'm *not* standing around being *shy* all the time with you."

"Excellent—then let's get to it while we're in the mood!"

"You've got one hell of a wrong idea if you think this is *the mood* in the first place! Hey—let me go! What're you doing?!"

"You have to *ask*? Geez, what an unromantic clod."

Yokozawa continued to protest violently, but Kirishima showed no sign of listening. Quite the contrary, he instead grabbed Yokozawa's arm and jerked him to his feet, patently feigning ignorance. Yokozawa found himself jerked into his bedroom and tossed onto the edge of the bed, where Kirishima climbed on top of him as he lay on his back.

"…!" His breath caught in his throat at their position, Kirishima holding him down by the shoulders as he stared down at Yokozawa.

"…You nervous?"

"Like hell."

"I'll take that pissy negation as a 'yes'. You're still recovering—so just sit back and relax. Don't worry—there's no Hiyori here, so you can take it easy."

"It's *my* house—of *course* she's not here."

"No Sorata either—so just for today, you can afford to be open and honest, c'mon. Oh and—by the way? You can't use, 'I haven't bathed' as an excuse this time."

"…"

At Kirishima's comment beating him to the punch, Yokozawa belatedly realized that he'd just gotten out of the shower. Seizing the opportunity with Yokozawa's voice stalled in his throat, Kirishima sealed his lips with a kiss, his tongue sweeping about his mouth and rendering him boneless. "Ngh…nn…"

*Damn* was this guy good at kissing. If they'd been standing up, his legs probably would've given out on him right about now. He'd never disliked their touching one another—but he hated having his senses laid bare and exposed for all to see. Maybe that was why the armor he usually wore was so thick.

"You know…you were pretty damn cute in the throes of a fever."

"…Ngh, why *you*…!" He flushed at having a topic that should've been closed brought up again. It was bad enough knowing that someone had seen him in such a state, with all his good sense gone out the window, but he just wanted to *die* remembering how he hadn't been sure what was real and what was a dream at the time.

“Well, you never smile at me like that usually… Though you’ll do it for Hiyo easily enough.”

“What the hell’s the point in being jealous of *your own daughter*? And if I went around grinning at you like that all the time, it’d be disgusting!”

“No it wouldn’t—I thought it was cute.”

“…Oh *right*. That’s just the kind of person you are; I forgot.” His strength left him in the face of Kirishima’s earnest, honest stressing of his feelings, and he flung his limbs splayed out onto the bed. It was stupid to keep fighting him on this point. It was clear he was simply arguing for argument’s sake, and being unreasonably stubborn just made the guy even happier.

“Still, I can’t believe I’m still having to remember that ‘*Wow, love can be a real bitch sometimes*‘ at my age. Feeling worried and regretting immature things I said or did, getting worked up over the simplest little comments…”

Yokozawa found himself captivated by Kirishima’s embarrassed grin; maybe all of those outspoken, open comments he bandied about usually were just…to disguise this side of him.

“Maybe this is what they mean by ‘finding love in your golden years’.”

“What the hell are you going on about? I’m not *that* old yet,” Kirishima sniped in return, then laughed out loud. If the first one to fall in love was the one destined to be hurt—then they were neither one of them walking away from this unharmed, probably.

“…I feel the same.”

“Huh?”

“I get all—*worked up* because of you too, you know. So—take responsibility.”

“!!”

Yokozawa snapped his hand out once more and curled his fingers into the collar of Kirishima’s shirt, jerking him forward and stealing his lips. He forced his tongue inside and initiated a provocative kiss, then slipped his free hand around the back of Kirishima’s head as he sat there shocked stupid and deepened the kiss further.

Shoving aside all sense of shame, he boldly ravaged Kirishima's mouth—if he showed one iota of shyness here, he'd be playing right into the guy's hands.

He slowly pulled away and muttered, "Now *this*…is me seducing you." And while a few regrets lingered in the back of his mind, there was no turning back now.

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"…Hng…!" Yokozawa's breath caught in his throat at the pressure he couldn't describe. Loosened up with some ointment as a substitute for lotion, he slid down deep as he could.

He hoped Kirishima hadn't forgotten that he was still recovering from his cold; he realized part of it was his own damn fault for goading the guy on, but this position was honestly pretty painful to maintain.

He'd thought that things might seem different looking down like this, but Kirishima's gaze, which seemed to curl about him, was the same as always. If anything, Yokozawa felt even *more* shameful in this position.

"What's wrong? You gonna get me off any time soon?"

"…ing that!"

He never would've thought the day would come that he'd skip out on work to climb on top of another man in the middle of the day on a weekday. At Kirishima's urging, he tried to move—but couldn't manage it. Maybe he'd lost any right to control over his own body, utterly tossed about as he'd been.

Still, he forcefully willed strength back into his knees, and vowing in his mind to make Kirishima climax first, he lifted his hips.

God, he hated that self-satisfied smile. Every time they fucked, he always thought *one of these days, just you wait…*, but that day had yet to come.

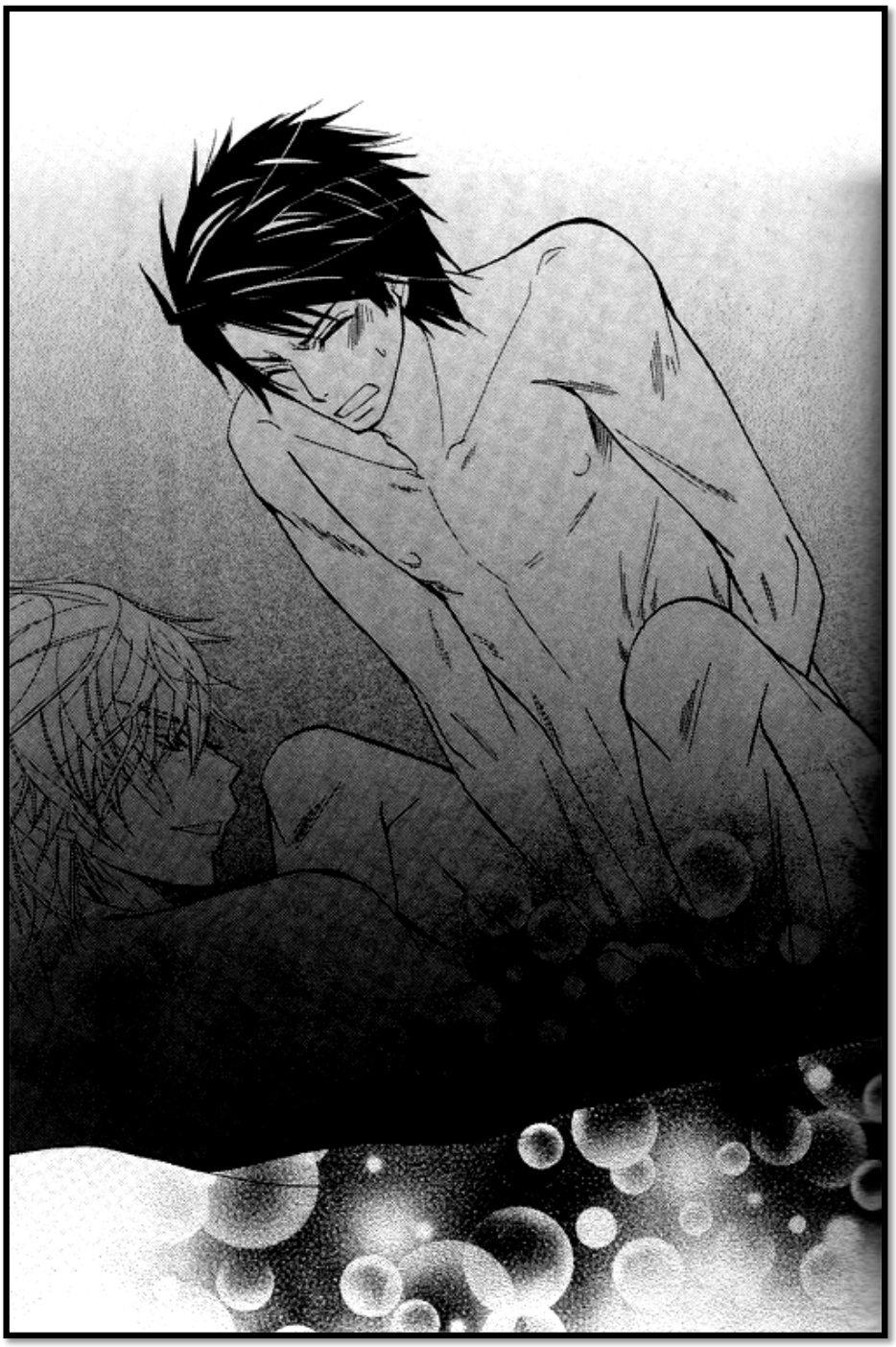
"Just place your hands here and lever your hips up—"

"I *know* what to do!" It ticked him off having something he knew full well pointed out to him, and he didn't need the asshole who'd put him in this position in the first place proudly crowing about it.

“We’re still not getting anywhere huh…”

“…Ah!”

Apparently unable to wait any more, Kirishima sharply thrust upward from below. “Now just—keep your hips raised like that.”



“Ngh…ha—Ah!” A faint numbness shuddered down his spine at the thrusts coming as he struggled to stay standing, and every time he felt his legs about to give out, another sharp jolt came and he cried out incoherently.

He grit his teeth at the sensation only a hair’s breadth away from pain; balanced at the edge of the ruthless thrusting in and out, it was hot enough to roast him from the inside out, and he felt on the verge of melting from the intensity.

“Haa…ah…”

The thrusts eventually achieved a steady rhythm, and he felt his insides quivering intermittently as Kirishima drove into him, legs nearly giving out beneath him.

“Not that I don’t *love* the view from here, but I’m about at my limit.”

“Wha…?”

Kirishima clenched his stomach muscles and heaved himself upright, using the momentum to shove Yokozawa down onto his back. Their positions now switched, he shoved Yokozawa’s legs apart.

“What’re you—”

“Yeah, now *this* is more like it…” Sounding rather pleased with himself, he drove deep into Yokozawa.

He wanted to protest *who the hell was it who told me to get up on top of you in the first place*, but the sound that leaked from his lips instead was far too erotic to be his own voice. “Hnng—ah…!”

His cock lay plump and straining against his stomach, waiting for the moment of release. What little sense he had left was being blown away in the wake of the rough pistoning, in and out, and his consciousness was being chased down, finding nothing but pleasure before it.

He brought the hands that had been groping about on the sheets to wrap around Kirishima, gripping tight, and while Kirishima’s brows drew together when Yokozawa dug his nails in, it was impossible to tell if it was because of the pain.

“…Feel good?” Kirishima threw out, a question he obviously already knew the answer to.

"Don't…ask…" He couldn't understand why the guy would ask something he knew fully well that Yokozawa wouldn't answer.

"Well—I feel so amazing I could *die*…"

"…!" At the rough whisper in his ear, Yokozawa felt the thrusts come at an ever-quickening pace. Kirishima pressed in tight, and Yokozawa's mind went blank. Both his body and mind were being completely ravaged, and he couldn't even properly tell up from down.

"Ah—*ah*—!" Mercilessly pushed to the brink of sensation, Yokozawa's passion burst forth.

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"You okay?"

"Of *course* not." Despite the fact that he'd only just recovered from his cold, they'd really overdone it. Even his throat, which shouldn't have been affected by his poor health, now felt raspy. He snatched up the glass Kirishima held out for him and let the liquid wash down his dry throat.

When he shoved the now-empty glass back into Kirishima's hands, the guy responded with a smile, chuckling, "Sorry."

"You're not *sorry* at all," he snarled, glaring at Kirishima's leering grin. He was really starting to hate the fact that glaring was all he could do these days.

"So…I guess I should confess one more thing. The reason I stripped off your underwear back at the hotel that time…was just because I wanted to see how you'd react."

"You—*WHAT*?!"

"Well think about it—no matter how much you puked up your guts, there's no way you could manage to get even your *underwear* dirty, right? It cracked me up how your expression was *exactly* what I expected it would be."

His hands clenched into fists with the sheer anger rising up inside, and he raised his voice at Kirishima, who was laughing at the mere memory. "Don't fuck around! Do you have any idea how I felt back then?!"

It was a nasty prank, even in jest. Sure, it was partly Yokozawa's own fault for getting so pissed out of his skull he couldn't even remember half the night, but Kirishima had no right making fun of him like this.

"Hmm, I suppose you were pretty flustered wondering what the hell you'd gotten yourself into—right?"

"…!"

He couldn't bring himself to say a word, trembling with fury and shame. He'd been wondering for a long time how on earth he could ever hope to *fix* this horrible side to Kirishima's personality. He didn't want the guy to be a *saint* or anything—but he could stand to get over this habit of amusing himself with such childish pranks.

"Oh—and I was thinking…you know, it's probably for the best you don't move in with us yet."

"Huh?"

At Yokozawa's evident confusion at the sudden change in subject, Kirishima crossed his arms and nodded to himself. "After all, we need a place where we can come and be alone without anyone else bothering us. You're always worrying about Hiyo at our place, right?"

"Don't use my apartment like a *love nest*!"

"Not like we have any choice. You always say you don't want to go to a hotel, after all. Or what—you don't want to be alone with me?"

"That's…that's not…" It really wasn't fair of Kirishima to ask questions like this—he didn't have any choice *but* to deny the accusation.

At Yokozawa's evident loss for how to respond, grasping for words, Kirishima slipped forward and whispered softly into his ear, "Sometimes I just want you all to myself."

"…!" A shiver slid down his spine at the low voice setting his eardrum to trembling, and while he'd only a moment ago been quaking with rage, he couldn't help but be seduced by the sweet words.

*Love is war* — if that was true, then he felt knee-deep in losses already.

Hiyori was due back today. Kirishima had set off in his car for the airport to make the plane's arrival, and while he waited for the two to return, Yokozawa was preparing dinner: today they were having chilled Chinese noodles.

Noting that they would be back any minute now, Yokozawa washed the just-boiled noodles in cold water and placed them on a clean plate. Just as he was seasoning the noodles with thinly sliced toppings, he caught the sound of someone running outside in the hall. He rinsed his hands off in the sink when the door to the *genkan* was flung open just as he was stepping out to greet them.

"Oniichan, I'm back!"

"Welcome home, Hiyo."

Hiyo, who'd practically flown inside, was tanned all over, almost completely black now. The shoulders peeking out of her dress were already starting to peel, and now that she'd removed her shoes, he could clearly see the outline of sandal straps on her feet.

Seeming to have roused just to greet Hiyori, Sorata calmly wandered in from further inside, rubbing against Hiyori's legs while she arranged her shoes.

"Sora-chan! I'm back~! Thanks for takin' care of everything while I was gone!" When Hiyori scooped him up, Sorata eagerly nosed her face. "I've got some souvenirs for you! Wait right here—I'll put it on you now!" She rifled through the pockets of her bag for a moment before pulling out what looked to be an aqua-colored ribbon.

"'S that a collar?"

"Yup! Grandma taught me how to do lacework, so I made this!"

"Wow, not bad." It fastened in the back behind the neck, and a small bell hung from the front. She'd undoubtedly chosen the color because it resembled the color of the *sky*.

Courtney Cummings 9/13/12 1:07 PM
**Comment [1]:** The Japanese word for 'sky' is 'sora', just like in the name 'Sorata', hence the connection between the color choice and the recipient.

Removing Sorata's current collar, she fastened the new one about his neck. The sky-blue collar really suited his white and black coat.

“Still, look at you—you’re burned to a crisp! Did you have fun at your grandmother’s?”

“Yup! A ton of fun! I even made some new friends there! We’re gonna be pen pals now. Oh, and at the airport, I had Papa buy me some cute stationery too!”

“I see.” His eyes crinkled as he watched her chatter merrily; it’d been far too quiet these few days without her here. Now it finally felt like things were back to normal.

“Oh, I got some souvenirs for you, too, Oniichan! I had Grandma send them, though, so I can’t give ‘em to you til tomorrow…”

“Well it’ll be ‘tomorrow’ before you know it. I can’t wait til they get here.”

“‘Kay! Look forward to them!”

Kirishima, arriving now belatedly, trudged into the living room while he pieced through the mail he’d picked up on the way. “I’m baaaack. Hiyo, Yuki-chan’s sent you a summer greeting card.”

“Really?! Oh wow, it’s got foreign stamps on it!” She pored over the postcard Kirishima handed her with a serious expression. If Yokozawa recalled correctly, she’d mentioned to Hiyori that her family was going overseas for vacation. She’d probably fired off a postcard to Hiyori the moment she arrived.

“Well let’s dig in—we’re having chilled Chinese noodles tonight.” At the description of the evening’s menu, Hiyori raised both hands in joy.

“How’d you know, Oniichan?? I was just thinking earlier that I wanted to have this for dinner!”

“Well I wanted it myself; now, both of you go get washed up before we eat.”

“Yessir~”

After shuttling her off to the bathroom, Yokozawa set the table—there was pudding in the fridge for dessert, but he’d set that out after their meal.

“Woooow it looks delicious!” Hiyori voiced her excitement as she surveyed the meal. It made the effort all the more worthwhile with such an appreciative audience. Even

six months ago, he never would've expected his rusty cooking skills to make a comeback under *these* circumstances.

As she settled into her seat, Hiyori innocently asked, "So, what did you two get up to while I was gone?"

"…Just, busy with work." Nothing that they'd done was anything they could possibly tell Hiyori about—but despite his smoothly delivered lie, Kirishima dropped a bomb on them when he sauntered in from the living room behind her.

"We had a *lot* of fun, just the two of us."

"…!"

He snapped a leg out to kick Kirishima for his suggestive phrasing, but this didn't seem to discourage him at all, and he continued purposefully, "What're you blushing for, *Takafumi*?"

"Cut. That. Out!" His face erupted into flame at being called by his given name for the first time. Even without glancing into a mirror, he knew he had to be beet red by now.

"Heeeey, did something happen while I was gone? C'mon, tell me!"

"It's nothing—now just, eat up. Your noodles'll get soggy."

"Ah—*Oniichan!*" Ignoring her question, Yokozawa fled into the kitchen, and despite fanning himself fervently with his hands, his flushed face just would not cool down.

***~THE END~***